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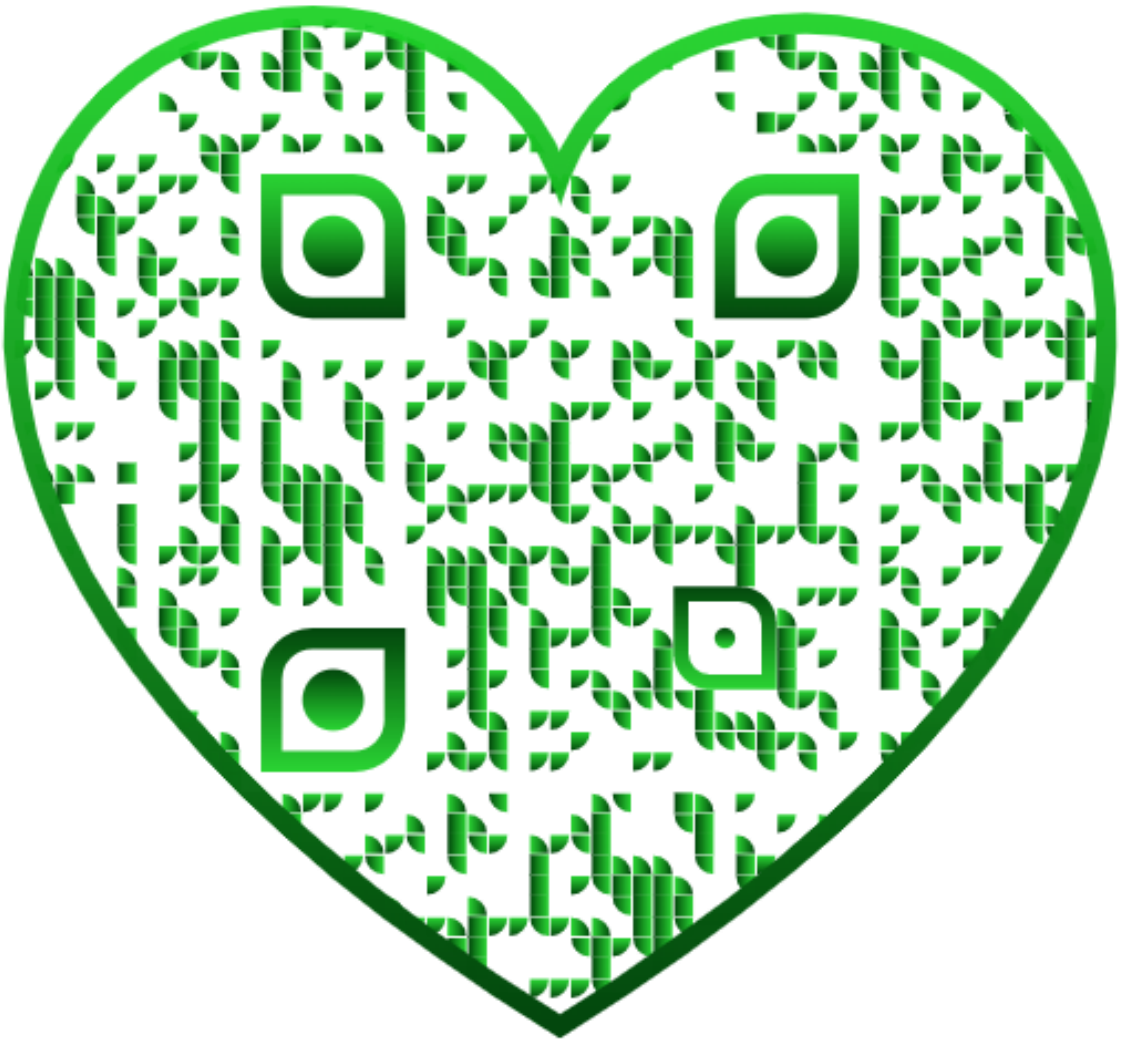

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An eye to the future

Thirty years ago – I'm talking pre-internet days – the idea of a musician 'searching for an identity' would have seemed alien. Pianists as different from each other as Argerich and Grimaud and Zimerman have been guided firstly by their teachers and then their own musical instincts, even if agents and promoters have played their part along the way.

Since then, it seems to me, the world of the professional pianist has changed, and the pace of that change is only accelerating. Young musicians find ever bolder and more innovative ways to stand out from their contemporaries, ways that don't always rely on their talents at the keyboard. Even those whose musical talents alone would guarantee their celebrity have gone in search of new audiences and new contexts for their performances. I recently attended Yuja Wang's dazzling show at London's Lightroom, where she was flanked on all sides by huge on-screen David Hockney pictures. Giving concerts was never really 'all about the music', but the idea seems ever more old-fashioned now.

In that sense, Chloe Flower is very much a pianist of our time. As our cover artist tells Warwick Thompson, her career path as a classical musician took a glamorous swerve when she saw Liberace in action: 'I wanted to be him so hard!' Her online presence now identifies her as 'a pianist, producer, composer, fashion influencer and activist'. She now performs with the likes of Cardi B, writes her own 'popsical' takes on old favourites and makes chart-topping records such as *Chloe Hearts Christmas* for Sony. And in doing so she reaches thousands who have never previously heard a note of Beethoven.

Whatever our own background and inclinations, we all benefit from keeping an eye on the future, and we all thrive on setting goals and fulfilling ambitions. As a new year beckons, what are you hoping to achieve in 2024? Perhaps you're preparing for a piano exam: Matthew Mills is here to help. Maybe you'd like to master an area of technique that has always bothered you: Mark Tanner focuses on arm weight in his masterclass.

Readers may remember how I moaned about my own trills in the last issue, so… I asked Graham Fitch for help. There's some trilling to accomplish in scores such as Bach's C minor Fantasia and Nielsen's *A Dream about 'Silent Night'*, but also some festive sparkle in a piece from Liszt's *Christmas Tree* Suite, and in Derry Bertenshaw's luscious arrangement of Holst's *In the Bleak Midwinter*.

If you're really in the mood to stretch yourself, now's the time to consider entering *Pianist*'s next competition for amateurs (watch this space…). Meanwhile, whatever the season holds for you, I wish you many hours of enjoyment at the piano.

Erica

editor@pianistmagazine.com

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WIN! CHLOE FLOWER'S NEW ALBUM 'CHLOE HEARTS CHRISTMAS'

Answer the question below correctly, and you could be one of three lucky winners to receive this new album from Sony.

Which famous musician did Chloe Flower perform with at the 2019 Grammys?

A. Celine Dion B. Harry Connick Jr C. Cardi B

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Stellar article from Schmitz

Thank you for sharing the wisdom of Elie Robert Schmitz in issue 134 ('Ahead of its Time'). There is so much to learn from this article, and I have had some of the experiences mentioned in the article. During my first and only real piano lessons (at age 50) I was assigned a page in a lesson book and then critiqued at the next visit. I found myself wanting to 'understand how to play' before I was told what I was doing wrong. So I didn't stay with that instructor very long at all.

Bill Olding, North Carolina, USA

... But not an easy read

For an experienced classical pianist perhaps the words of Elie Robert Schmitz may be nodded through and agreed with, largely. However, any early learner would be distinctly put off by the deeply pedagogical approach he takes. There is always a gap between those that have learned a skill from early years, and those who are learning, and the teacher always needs to have this in the forefront of their mind. For example, I found that when I wanted to learn to swim, most people who could swim were useless as teachers; when I found the right teacher, then I learned. The same is true of early learning of anything, including the piano. Very experienced players may even find Schmitz's four-item bullet points in conclusion quite sufficient. For us earth-scratching peasants, merry or otherwise, perhaps a read of Kendall Taylor's book *Principles of Piano Technique and Interpretation* (published by Novello, 1981) may well be more friendly, rewarding and encouraging. I managed to get hold of a pristine copy at a charity shop, always a potential source of cheap music, and as an early/intermediate learner, what he says and how he says it makes a lot of sense in an un-challenging way. It has helped me a lot.

Gerald Lambert, Devon, UK

More ways of learning

I read your interesting article on Elie Robert Schmitz's book and it reminded me about another book I'd read many years ago by the famous teacher York Bowen, also of course performer and composer. Entitled *The Simplicity of Piano Technique*, it's just 36 pages long and concentrates on physical technique only, so does not go into other areas of teaching. At the time I was struggling with tension in the hands and found his practical, no nonsense verbal approach very helpful. There are no illustrations – just straightforward descriptions and explanations, and they are so easy to understand. Bowen apparently wrote it towards the end of his career having resisted the temptation of writing something earlier, though clearly he would have been well qualified to do so. I believe it's still available, published in 1961 by Stainer & Bell.

Steve Langford, Christchurch, UK

Transcendental meditation

Over the past few weeks I've been wading through my fairly substantial piano music collection and after much thought, reality has bitten. Knowing my own considerable pianistic limitations, there are just some works I will never ever attempt and over the years I've bought more than my fair share. I thought someone within the *Pianist* community would appreciate these publications (which include Liszt's *Transcendental Studies*, his Second Polonaise and more). I am happy to pass these on gratis; I did this some time ago with the piano transcriptions of some Beethoven quartets. Perhaps there's a germ of an idea for a back page spot for such things, much in the manner of adverts for pianos for sale, which featured in the magazine some time ago. I have quite a mass of music which is beyond my digital abilities!

Anthony Smith, Norfolk, UK

Should readers be tempted by Anthony's kind offer, contact the editor at editor@pianistmagazine.com.

Update

Reader Gavin Littaur would like to point out a small typo that crept into his story on Robson Lowe and John Field ('Fuzzy memory', Letters issue 134). The occasion was in the late 1990s (Lowe died in 1997), not the late 1970s.

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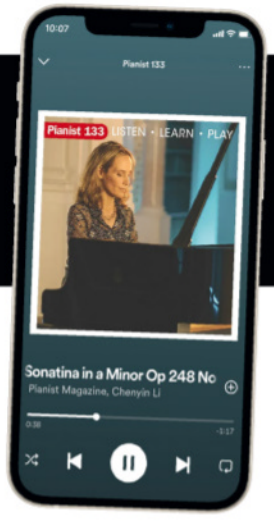

CHLOE FLOWER

CHLOE HEARTS CHRISTMAS

Experience the holidays like never before, as pianist, composer & producer Chloe Flower puts her spin on classic carols, festive favourites & contemporary holiday hits with the stunning new album Chloe Hearts Christmas

SONY MUSIC

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It was a very good year

Pianist looks at some of the manufacturers and retailers who have contributed to making 2023 one exciting year

For the piano world, notably in the UK, there's been a lot to be cheerful about in 2023. Those of us with deep pockets will likely have checked out some seriously luxurious pianos. Steinway & Sons, whose 170th anniversary concert took place at the Wigmore Hall on 10 November, recently released its limited edition 'The London' piano, a collaboration between Based Upon and Steinway & Sons (see image, top). For 'The London', Based Upon sought inspiration from the leaves of the London Plane tree, a species found in the city's central locations such as The Mall, Berkeley Square and Regents Park. Noting the veins of the leaf are redolent of London's fabled streets, the Plane tree's leaves have been cast in brass to form the piano's music desk. On the underside of the lid, the leaf is subtly placed as though in motion, caught by the wind, while the topstick is an abstraction of a Plane tree's branch. London's skyline is elegantly depicted on the piano's hinge, informed by a series of photographs taken by Based Upon as they walked the banks of the city's River Thames. The piano was unveiled at the Michelin-star restaurant The Ledbury this past October.

Another unveiling in October was the 'Harmony of Nature' baby grand piano from the Goldfinch specialist division of Edelweiss Piano (see image bottom of page 9). The commission was led by Ambika Hinduja Macker from Impeccable Imagination – the sculpture cast in bronze and clad in 22.5 karat moon-gold leaf, replicating the textures of nature. From a distance, the sculptural silhouette of the curled, dried shape of the leaf creates a vacillating illusion of its appearance, from the abstract to the real until the lid is lifted to reveal the glistening black and white keys held open by a thin twig-like curvilinear support. None other than Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber surprised guests when he gave it a test drive at London's V&A museum launch. Edelweiss's flagship showroom is just across the road at Harrods, so you can see if 'Harmony of Nature' is on display when next popping into the iconic store.

Limited to 25 grand pianos worldwide, Bösendorfer has recently released its latest Gustav Klimt-inspired collector's item piano, 'Tree of Life'. Inspired by the famous Austrian painter's work of the same name, the craftsmen at Bösendorfer have managed to transfer the imagery and original drawings from that and another Klimt work, 'Expectation', to the piano lid interior by means of an elaborate reprography technique. The jewellery of the woman depicted in 'Expectation' has been intricately hand-gilded in the finest 23 carat gold leaf. The inner rim of the piano is finished in matt black, and, together with the colour-coordinated cast iron frame, enhances the luminosity of the imagery on the lid interior. The music stand uses further elements from the 'Tree of Life', including the falcons, in ornamental form. Dazzling, indeed. (Images, top of page 9).

Tour around the capital

Great pianos wouldn't be anything without the showrooms that nurture them, and there have been some interesting developments here, too. Those who enjoy a stroll in London's West End might have noticed the big Bechstein 'work in progress' sign at No 22 Wigmore Street. The building is preparing to open its doors not only to a Bechstein showroom, but to a

huge space that includes an intimate 107-seat concert hall and restaurant. Ukranian pianist Vadym Kholodenko gives the opening concert on 2 September 2024. We say book your tickets now!

Head over to bustling Soho, and the three-storey flagship Yamaha showroom has had a bit of a makeover. The big upgrade has been focused on the lower two floors, where many of Yamaha's instruments, including digital pianos, are on display. We've not seen it yet, but we hope that the stunning third floor, home to some 30 top-end acoustic uprights and grands, hasn't been tampered with; it's a stunning wooden-panelled room – worth a visit if just to witness the old-style architecture. This top-floor space was the backdrop for the Store Launch Party on 12 October where legendary pianist Jools Holland played boogie-woogie on the Yamaha CFX Concert Grand piano.

A little south of King's Cross is where Peregrine's Pianos – suppliers of August Förster and Schimmel – has opened up a brand-new mini showroom next door to its main one, dubbed 'Little Peregrine'. The new space is used to display pre-loved pianos and hire instruments, and also features a workshop for the fine regulation and adjustments of piano actions.

Back to the future

Most makers are steeped in history, and one such is the Bayreuth-based house of Steingraeber, whose history spans more than 200 years. Fast forward to 2023, and the company says a fond farewell to its long-serving and irrepressible MD Udo Schmidt-Steingraeber, who hands over the reins to his children Fanny and Alban. As seventh generation Steingraebers, both have been working in the family business since their school days, so we are sure the company is in safe hands. Steingraeber pianos aren't that easy to locate in the UK but Markson Pianos in London, the only south-of-England distributor, has a few scattered around its showroom.

Why always London, you may ask? Well, if you live further north and can't make it to Steinway's Wigmore Hall concert on 10 November, then head along to the Forsyth music shop in Manchester, where, a week later on the 17th, you can hear Kathryn Stott and friends in a concert of French Piano Classics. The concert is just one of the inspiring events that Forsyth's continue to present.

And finally, if all you want to do is languish in the comfort of your own home, listen to pianist Chenyin Li, who continues to dazzle readers with her interpretations of the scores appearing inside each issue. Her fingers dance gracefully over the keys of a Shigeru Kawai EX Concert Grand. ■

INTERVIEW

Spreading a little HAPPINESS

TAP TO WATCH
Chloe Flower 'Christmas Tree'

Chloe Flower 'When I See You Again'

CHLOE FLOWER

Chloe Flower's CV includes Juilliard, the Royal Academy and a stonking Grammys performance with Cardi B. The crossover Korean-American pianist talks to **Warwick Thompson** about her new Christmas album, a near-death experience and a life full of 'Chloincidences'

I must confess to suffering a few nerves before my Zoom interview with Chloe Flower. As part of my research, I'd watched several of her colourful YouTube videos. She performs lush arrangements of pop, rap and hip-hop numbers (she calls her mash-up style 'popsical') and I noticed that she almost never smiles in them. One could even go as far as to say she looks pretty severe. Yikes. Would she snap my head off at an inept question? Reader, I trembled.

And then she popped up on the screen from her high-rise apartment in New York, and was as chirpy and cheerful as a chipmunk. She was brimming with Los Angeles-style positivity, and laughed a lot. Phew. But what was the deal, I asked. Why so fierce in the vids?

'I *know*, right! It's true. The boys on my team noticed it too. And I'm usually smiling *all* the time! I'm so annoyingly happy!'

Judging from her sunshiny manner during our call, she certainly ain't lying.

'I guess when I'm playing, I'm just so serious about it. And maybe film editors like that fierce look? I just shot a campaign for Volvo, and I noticed they didn't use *any* shots of me smiling either. But it's true, I'm so serious when I'm playing.'

She hoots with laughter at the joke of it all.

Funnily enough, she does smile in a video which was only released online after our conversation – it accompanies her swoony cover of the Korean pop number 'Christmas Tree' – and she very sweetly lets out a little cheeky grin 48 seconds in. So maybe future videos will show more of Smiley Chloe rather than Severe Chloe. Watch this space.

Carols and kimchee

The above-mentioned video is part of the promotional campaign for Flower's Christmas album, *Chloe Hearts Christmas*. It's a feelgood compilation, with some familiar carols, some old standards, some new-ish favourites, and some surprises. In the first category there's 'God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen' and a fun Liberace-style compilation number of carols; in the second there's Leroy Anderson's 'Sleigh Ride', and Tchaikovsky's 'Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy'; in the third you have the lovely melancholy waltz 'Once Upon a December' from the film *Anastasia*, and the theme music to *Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence* by Ryuichi Sakamoto; and in the last we find Ariana Grande's upbeat hit 'Santa Tell Me' amusingly repurposed into a slow ballad.

'I love Christmas,' she says. 'I'm obsessed with everything about it. Especially in New York, there's this special appreciation for it, and as soon as Thanksgiving is over people are kinder, everyone's happier. There's so much of a nicer vibe.' She also likes to link her popsical style, with its varied roots, to Christmas memories of her mixed cultural heritage as a Korean-American. 'It's like my dad's Christmas plate, filled with stuffing and kimchee. You might not think they go together at first, but they really do!'

She currently has care of Liberace's crystal-encrusted piano in her apartment – the make is Baldwin, if you're interested – on loan from his foundation where she's on the board of directors. But she recorded the keyboard tracks for her album in Los Angeles on Lady Gaga's model D Steinway. 'It was just a coincidence that I got to play on that instrument. Well, actually, I call it a "Chloincidence" because it happens so much in my life. It just turned out that it was the only model D they had available. And it was bright red, so it was just perfect for a Christmas album.'

Manhattan transfer

The pianist was born Chloe Won (Chloe Flower is her social media and professional name) in 1985 in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, to a real-estate agent father and pharmacologist mother, both immigrants from Korea. (Interestingly, both parents changed careers later in life: her father took up law and her mother became a professor of art history.)

Flower was drawn to the piano from around two years old, and after starting lessons with a local teacher, she was soon getting up at 4am to practise before school. 'I was super self-motivated,' she says. But things took a more serious turn in 1998, when Flower and her mother accidentally drove past signs for the Bartok-Kabalevsky Piano Competition on their way to a shopping mall. 'It was so easy to get in – there was no security, even,' she giggles. One of the joint winners of the Grades 7-9 round was a young girl called Yin Ma, and Chloe was so impressed with her playing that she begged to know who her teacher was. Upon learning that it was Zenon Fishbein at the Manhattan School of Music, she took his number and boldly called him up as soon as she got home. She was 12, 'but I already felt like a grown woman,' she says.

Fishbein was intrigued enough to offer her an audition in New York. He told her that her technique wasn't up to scratch, but if she could improve enough before September (it was now June) he would audition her again. 'I had to learn a Chopin étude and a Haydn sonata. It took 14 hours a day for three solid months. But I did it, and was accepted.'

'I went home and looked up Liberace, and just loved what I saw. I wanted to be him so hard!'

She credits Fishbein with giving her finger exercises to improve her technique, and with developing her musicality. 'He was amazing – the artistry and musicality he showed me was so intense. I definitely became a much more sensitive player as a result.' To this day, however, she laments the small size of her hands. 'I couldn't understand how other classmates could play *La campanella* so easily, whereas I could barely reach an octave.'At this point, I make a comment on her tendency to play with flattened fingers, like Horowitz, on some of her videos. 'I always try to play curved – Mr Fishbein would stop me if I played with flat fingers, and make me start over – but when I can't reach, I have to stretch in a flattened way.'

There was an unexpected benefit – an ironic one, even – to her lessons as well. 'Mr Fishbein once saw me wave my hand in the air at the end of a phrase [it's a particular feature of her playing style even now] and he hit me with a pencil and told me that I looked like Liberace. I didn't know who he meant, but I guessed it wasn't a good thing. So I went home and looked up Liberace, and just loved what I saw. I wanted to ▶

All photos © Peter Ash Lee

TAP TO WATCH
Chloe Flower 'Dance of the Sugar Plum Fair'

TAP TO WATCH
Chloe Flower 'No Limit'

be him so hard! Maybe he wasn't the most sensitive musician, but I loved the way he arranged music, his voicing, the way the piano came in and out from the orchestra. I really became obsessed. But I never told Mr Fishbein that he was the one to set me on that path.'

Following a different path

She later spent two years with Herbet Stessin at Juilliard, and then moved to London for her college years to study at the Royal Academy of Music under Aaron Shorr.

I asked Professor Shorr (currently head of keyboard at the Royal Conservatory of Scotland) what he remembered of Chloe during this time and he was full of praise for her dedication, and for her career choices. 'She studied with me in the early 2000s, and I recall her distinctive personality and dedicated work ethic. I celebrate her high levels of commitment, skill and artistic purpose, as well as her current achievements in breaking down barriers. As for taking inspiration from Liberace, I totally approve. He was a well-trained and gifted pianist, and that's why his fame was so enduring and much loved.'

It was while studying in London that she first began to explore the world of nightclubs and became entranced by the music she encountered, and the way DJs would blend, bend, and remix the tracks they were playing. 'Then I saw a video of the rap song "Lean Back" by the Terror Squad while I was shopping in Topshop, and as soon as I got back to my practice room, where I was working on a Bach partita, I started playing the Bach over the track, and suddenly thought: this could work! I could put them together. At that time classical crossover was usually just classical with a techno beat sound, but this was so different.'

She began to appreciate the need for a new approach. 'I felt like I was learning a new instrument. Suddenly it's not just about the music. Lighting matters. Clothes matter. Engaging with the audience matters. My previous teachers had taught me not to consider the audience at all, but to play as if they weren't there, as if I were in a bubble.'

Back in the States, she began to release material on social media, and in 2011 was spotted by successful R&B producer Kenny 'Babyface' Edmonds; this led to gigs with Celine Dion, the rapper Timbaland, and then in 2019 with female rap artist Cardi B at the Grammys ceremony (where she performed on Liberace's piano). 'I was so lucky. Cardi saw my Instagram, and just called me up and invited me to play.' This launched her into an even higher level of celebrity, and she received thousands of messages from children inspired by her playing. 'Here am I, an Asian woman, on a crystal piano, with big hair and a huge dress, with Cardi B – suddenly a classical instrument looks different. I don't necessarily think it's best to sugar coat everything with shiny pretty things, but this turned out to be a real entry point for hundreds of kids. Even adults got in touch, saying they wanted to learn the piano again.'

'My previous teachers had taught me not to consider the audience at all, but to play as if they weren't there, as if I were in a bubble'

A brighter future for all

This brings us on to another strand in Chloe's career: her passion for music education. 'There are no music programmes in our public schools in the US, so it's my goal to try to inspire kids to create a demand, and to campaign for funding. Here, education is mandated by the state, not the federal government, so I've been trying to figure out a way to create a bill for legislation that would mean I wouldn't have to go state-by-state to create change. I didn't know anything about politics, but I've been working with the RISE foundation set up by Amanda Nyugen to learn how to draught bills.'

One gets the impression that there are never enough hours in the day for her energy; and indeed, she tells me a story of how there were almost no hours left for her at all. In 2007, during a classical performance tour of Asia, she decided on a whim to fly to Cambodia to visit the temple complex Angkor Wat. 'When I got there it was raining the whole day, so I decided to stay another night in the hotel, rather than fly to the beaches in Sihanoukville, which had been my plan. The ticket was only 40 dollars so I didn't even cancel it. The next morning, I read that the flight had crashed, killing everyone on board.' (The crash of PMTair Flight 241, with 22 fatalities, is regarded as one of the worst in Cambodian history.) 'I felt: why am I here? Why am I still alive?'

To distract herself, she rented a bicycle to explore the local city of Siem Reap. 'But the chain broke, so I found myself wandering round the dirt-poor suburbs. And I saw these little girls – aged five or six – sitting on a porch under a red light. I couldn't believe it. When I got back to the hotel, I googled 'child/brothel/Cambodia' and my eyes were opened to the terrible human trafficking that goes on. And I knew I had to start campaigning for greater awareness.'

It was only a few years later, when preparing to give a talk to the UN, that the proverbial light bulb lit in her head. 'I was listing the risk factors of trafficking – poverty, lack of community, lack of infrastructure – and thinking of the benefits of music education – increased self-worth, improved educational capacity, working as a team – and I realized that the benefits exactly matched the risks. Music education can literally help solve trafficking. The two passions came together. And prevention is so much better than rescue.'

I feel we've come a long way from *Chloe Hearts Christmas* – but then, on reflection, maybe we haven't. The campaigning, the glitz, the warmth and the energy all somehow seem to spring from the same source. And like the stuffing-and-kimchee Christmas dinner of her dad, they all seem to find a way to mingle in harmony. ■

Chloe Hearts Christmas *is out now on Sony Music Masterworks. For further information about Chloe Flower and all of her projects, go to www.chloeflower.com.*

FROM THE TOP ALL THE WAY DOWN TO THE FINGERTIPS
ARM WEIGHT

The act of striking a note doesn't start with the hand, says Mark Tanner, who advises to begin from the upper body in order to produce a beautiful tone, whether soft or loud

We'll likely have come across various references to using arm weight in piano playing. Matters quickly become confusing – physiological and anatomical jargon easily gets in the way of a clear message. In essence, the objective is to use our bodies in a balanced, relaxed manner, harnessing power when it is needed without exerting force in tension-inducing ways or working against ourselves. The simile of a 'hanging' bridge, suspended robustly at both ends but remaining ultra-flexible in-between, can help us to conceptualise the arm from fingertip to upper body. At the instant keys are struck, especially from a greater height, the briefest of tension moments inevitably arises (somewhat like shock-absorbers on a vehicle going over a speed bump), but should just as quickly dissipate, instantly restoring the sensation of a relaxed arm, fully and freely connecting the point of contact – i.e. the fleshy pads of the fingers – to the body.

Naturally, as we move around the keyboard, our centre of gravity shifts accordingly, requiring our feet to be firmly positioned for support. Sit to optimise comfort and ease of mobility around both keyboard extremities. If in doubt regarding seat height and distance from the keyboard, go with what feels natural – when encountering an unfamiliar instrument don't just accept the default setting. An Olympian physique isn't needed to play clearly and powerfully without fatigue – we just need to make the best use of what we have.

> When summoning power, resist the idea that you should push, drive or force the arm down to meet the keys

Tone

We don't produce a reliably warm and projected tone – let alone a smoothly graduated transition between notes – by jabbing at or hitting the keys, but by aligning arm weight with a curved hand. A pleasing legato from one note to another 'feels' not unlike walking, whereby we effortlessly combine forward momentum with fluid weight transfer; it's literally as easy as moving from one foot to the other. The brief overlap that exists between two connected notes is also the moment arm weight is transferred between the two fingers; satisfyingly, the sound and the feel of the movement becomes one 'thing'. Once a key has been sent to strike its string(s), nothing is gained by pushing or bearing down on the key – after all, we don't *feel* a need to bounce up and down on each foot to confirm it's reached the ground when we're walking!

By approaching a piano key from above it, playing the note and coming back up off the key smoothly with some 'give' in the wrist, we engage our arm weight profitably, avoiding stiffness and any type of tension. And by imagining a full tone (even at the *pianissimo* dynamic) we're mentally preparing to commit to the sound a split-second beforehand, triggering the physical action, thereby avoiding a 'surface' or fragile tone. Conversely, producing a full *fortissimo* is not akin to wielding an axe, simply a matter of controlled weight release and distribution, whereby gravity aids us free of charge.

5 TOP TIPS: Law of physics

1. Maximum freedom of movement comes from utilising arm weight in conjunction with a good seating position and a relaxed but alert posture.
2. A warmly projected tone (even at *pianissimo*) is best achieved by channeling arm weight to the fleshy pads of the fingers.
3. A legato effect comes about via a musically controlled overlap of notes coupled with an easy transfer of arm weight from one finger to another.
4. Power comes from harnessing arm weight and allowing gravity to 'do its thing'.
5. Irrespective of whether playing quietly or loudly, avoid starting with the finger(s) touching the key(s).

Exercise

We've most probably experimented by allowing the 'dead' weight of the arm to fall from various heights down to the keyboard, but it's worth seeing how we can incorporate this when producing a refined, graded tone across a full dynamic range. Anything (including our arm) that falls, accelerates, so from a practical (if not strictly Newtonian perspective), the larger the space in which our arm falls, the greater the acceleration and the louder the resultant sound. This is why it makes more sense to think of volume as a function of *speed*, or velocity, not how 'hard' we strike the key.

• Begin by sitting as if preparing to start playing, arms resting on your lap. Now place one hand (palm up) under the other forearm, and consciously take the full weight of the arm – notice how heavy it is. If you raise the same arm higher now (unaided, hinged lightly at the elbow), even to head height, and release its full weight onto the awaiting hand, it can be surprising how much power is generated without exerting any effort at all – we're not employing muscles, either from the arm, wrist or upper torso, but simply allowing the arm to fall at the pace it does naturally. As pianists, this is perhaps the closest we can achieve to the sensation of weightlessness.
• Now try this same action from, say, 8-10 inches above a closed piano lid – arrive tension-free onto firm but not stiff fingers, allowing the wrist to absorb the 'shock'. Prove to yourself how flexible and free your forearm and wrist are by making small circular motions.
• The moment the hand lands, ensure no downward effort is applied. A second or two later, raise the arm again, and enjoy the feeling of allowing the relaxed wrist to 'give' somewhat – a small rocking motion from the fingertips away from you can help. Repeat the entire sequence a few times, tension-free, connecting the downward motion to the upper one in a weightless, effortless way.
• A similar action can now be applied to playing a triad, octave or even a single note (try touching your second and third fingertips with your thumb to form a circle, then land solidly on all three digits simultaneously). But I'd start with a five-note cluster chord, to sense how I'm spreading the load of my arm uniformly across the whole hand.
• Experiment by releasing the arm from different heights. Close your eyes and, in your mind, align the physical motion with how the whole action feels and sounds. See if you can increase volume in almost imperceptible steps from *pppp* to *ffff* and back down. Regardless of dynamic, enjoy the feeling of solidity as you land on the keys, but avoid digging in.
• Now apply your heightened sense of control to music you're currently learning.

Power

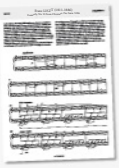
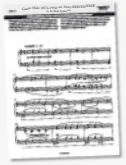
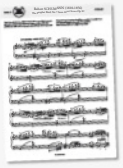
When summoning power, resist the idea that you should push, drive or force the arm down to meet the keys. A useful tip here is not to start with the hand(s) touching or only a few millimetres above the key(s) – for this brings about the *opposite* of what has just been practised and will likely result in the following:

- A hard, edgy sound
- Limited power
- Uneven voicing and coordination, or non-sounding notes
- Unwanted (and unhealthy!) tension/jolting in the whole body, from the hand right up to the neck

Ironically, it may be the case that pianists encounter these or other undesirable results when attempting to play quietly, rather than loudly. Again, there is probably a less than optimal deployment of arm weight/transfer, and consequent seizing-up (symptoms including rigidly arched fingers, stiff wrists, hunched upper torso, neck disappearing into the shoulders). Though finger independence is an indispensable facet of piano playing, importantly, this needs to function in concert with the supplest of wrists and arms so that the fingers and arms aren't working as opposing forces. It may seem counterintuitive to use arm weight when playing a sweet *cantabile* melody, but this is how we best align our physiology with the piano's mechanism. ■

www.marktanner.info

Smooth landing

Mark Tanner's advice for spreading the load in 3 of this issue's scores

Liszt *Formerly*: An excellent piece to refine your touch control! The sparsely textured music near the beginning and end needs to speak clearly, even at bars 45-46 (*ppp*). You could do much useful practice with these enigmatic fragments alone, to achieve a consistently sweet, clear tone. The impassioned music midway, which builds via several rinforzandos, crescendos and an accelerando to the climax, demands the more orchestral end of your dynamic palette; gradually allow extra weight to come from the upper body through to the arms and fingers, but check yourself regularly for any signs of tightening-up in the neck and shoulders.

Holst arr. Bertenshaw *In the Bleak Midwinter*: A multitude of tone colours and voicings await attention here, from the music's intimate opening to the more enraptured areas, i.e. bars 50-65, to the uber-feathery leggiero touch called for in the final line. For the tune itself, irrespective of where it sits in the register (there are some lovely imitative ideas and canons shared between the hands that need careful prising out), a committed tone should always win through. Where the LH has arpeggiated chords landing on melodic notes, be especially mobile and free with the wrist; do all the work with arm weight and a caressing touch.

Schumann *The Prophet Bird*: Isolate any of the many recurring motivic patterns and practise them using as daring a range of dynamics as possible. Ensure the tone is always centred (don't shrink away when tackling the quietest notes), applying arm weight in the subtlest gradations. Allow a generous degree of rotary wrist movement to help negotiate the wider stretches, but guard against digging in with the fifth finger when landing on the *fp* notes.

ALL THINGS ORNAMENTAL
TRILLING WITH EASE

In this article, pianist and teacher **Graham Fitch** looks at how to approach trills in the various style periods, as well as offering some suggestions for how to solve the technical problems they pose

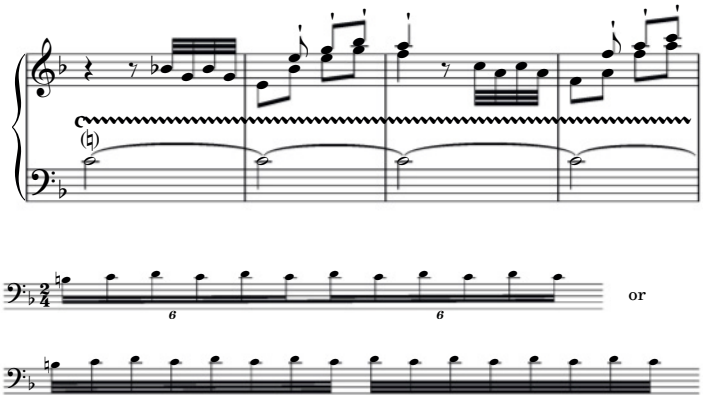
Trills appear in music from all style periods, usually indicated by the *tr* symbol above the note. For those of you who have been tuning in to my masterclasses for a while, you may note that I wrote another article on trills inside issue 75. Here, though, I take it from a different angle.

There are several issues with trills that we need to consider:
-Do we start on the main note, or the upper note?
-Should the trill be short or long, loud or soft, measured or free?
-How do we make sense of the bewildering array of signs and symbols used to indicate ornaments?
-How do we play them without stiffening up?

Ornament symbols

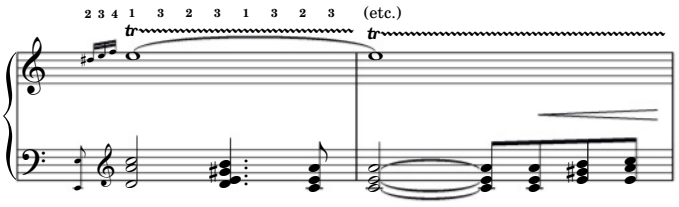
Fortunately for us, many composers have left specific instructions for the realisation of the ornament signs they used. What makes the subject complex is that the same symbol can mean something different from one composer and style period to another. Take the symbol, for instance. In the 19th century this meant an upper mordent (or *Schneller*) consisting of three notes (main-upper-main). However, according to all the ornament tables from the French and German Baroque period, it indicates a short trill that comes on the beat, starting on the note above the given note. The Baroque trill consists of a minimum of four notes but may contain as many repercussions as desired, according to the duration of the given note and the good taste of the player.

In some editions, we find pictographs of trills and other ornaments supplied by the editor. While these literally notated realisations can be helpful in defining the shape of ornaments, playing them rigidly, in too measured a fashion, does not usually sound good (think of the difference between caged birds and free ones). We play the trill at the start of the Allemande from Bach's G major French Suite expressively, not mechanically, with the possibility of lingering on the first note if we desire, and of doing it differently on the repeat, perhaps by adding a turn at the start (described in ornament tables as an 'ascending trill'). At the top of the next column the Bach Allemande bar appears as is. Then, below it, No 1 is a literal pictograph; No 2 a possible realisation, approximately notated, to be played freely; and No 3 a pictograph of the ascending trill as an option for the repeat.

Other trills work better when we organise them rhythmically, such as this spot from Haydn's Sonata in F Hob XVI/23 (around bar 105). Notice the little hook at the start of the ornament symbol, indicating a turn from below before the trill itself. Like most trills from the Classical period, it is customary to add a termination (turn) even when this is not marked – thus the trill ends with the notes B♮-C (at around bar 110). It's important to point out that the faster a trill, the harder it is to hear rhythmic precision, and while it's a great idea to come up with one or more written-out rhythmical versions, we can let the trill do its own thing in performance.

Trills in the Classical Period follow the Baroque principles (an upper note start on the beat). In Johann Nepomuk Hummel's book, *A Complete Theoretical and Practical Course of Instructions in the Art of Playing the Piano Forte* (1828), the author proposes starting trills on the main note in his own music in order to make the melody line clearer. While Brahms, Grieg, Liszt, Mendelssohn and Schubert followed this principle, others (including Beethoven, Chopin, Schubert and Weber) stuck to the older traditions as set out in CPE Bach's *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments* (1787) and Muzio Clementi's *Introduction to the Art of Playing on the Piano Forte* (1801). It's easy to see where the confusion lies today, especially when musicians of the Romantic era began to apply Hummel's proposals to the music of earlier periods, in violation of the principle that ornaments should be realised in accordance with stylistic conventions of the time when the music was composed. Being a follower of the 'old rules', Chopin expected the grace notes in the LH trill in bar 25 of the G minor Ballade to be played on the beat, together with the RH G. The shape of this ornament (the same as the preceding Haydn example) is identical to the Baroque 'ascending trill with termination', indicated by the symbol .

Fingering

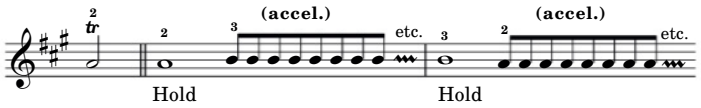
When we encounter trills at the elementary level, the most natural fingering is between 2 and 3. As we develop as pianists, we explore other possibilities. For more power, we can use a rotary trill between 1 and 3, the motions coming from the forearm (experiment with a slightly lower wrist here). Another possibility is to alternate finger pairs – try 1323, or 2324. This example from the first movement of the Schumann Concerto is a case in point.



When we need to trill with the outer fingers, 3-5 or 2-4 are much easier than 3-4 or 4-5.

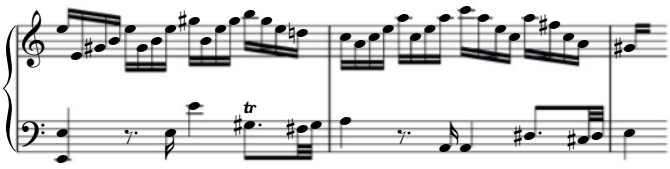
Technique

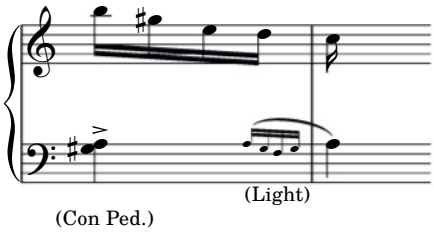
Here are a few general points on technique for trill playing:
-Keep the arm light.
-Avoid pressing into the keys.
-Play from the surface of the keys (on an upright piano) or inside the keys (grand piano). Remember we don't need to release a key all the way to the top in order to replay it. When we trill, we minimise motion by finding the spot at the sounding point.
This repeated note exercise at the top of the next column will help (make sure to keep the wrist soft and flexible):



Using micro movements, walk the fingers along the length of the key towards the fall board in short trills; walk in and out to create a gentle undulation of the arm in long trills. Put in another way, we aim to play each note of the trill on a different spot on the key surface (see my video demonstration).

Sleight of hand

Since we pianists must be masters of illusion, I have no hesitation in sharing my 'cheat' trill. It works beautifully as a solution for players who cannot always manage a measured trill, such as we find in the LH in the first movement of Mozart's Sonata in A minor K310 (from bar 74). [The first movement of the Sonata appeared inside issue 133.]

Play the two notes of the trill dead together. After a moment, allow the two keys to come up the tiniest little bit then start to vibrate between them in the manner of an unmeasured tremolo. This vibration does not need to be precise, or especially fast or loud to give the illusion of an impressive, energetic trill. The ear remembers the percussive event at the start and all we need to do is to fill in the few remaining notes very lightly. It works better with a touch of pedal.

Here is how it might look, very approximately, when notated:

Conclusion

Consider the function of each trill in its context. Does it create a moment of delicacy, such as a moth fluttering in lamplight, or something shriller, like a call to arms? You might want to give a trill a beginning (perhaps slower), a crescendo towards the middle, and an end (either accelerating to the next note or relaxing into it). Don't fall into the trap of thinking a trill has to be superfast; a steadier, even trill is usually more effective. ■

For detailed help with the trills in Chopin's C sharp minor Nocturne, follow this link to Graham's study edition on the Online Academy at pianistm.ag/nocturne.

@ GET IN TOUCH

Graham Fitch would like to hear from readers who have piano-playing questions, whether about a certain technique or a passage in a piece of music. Please write to editor@pianistmagazine.com. Due to the large number of requests, Graham may not be able to answer every question submitted. *More about Graham at www.practisingthepiano.com*

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THE SCORES

Pianist 135 • Read the **lessons** • Play the **scores**

LESSONS FROM THE **EXPERTS**

MELANIE SPANSWICK is a piano pedagogue, author, and composer. She has written over 25 books, including the best-selling course, *Play It Again: PIANO* (Schott Music). Melanie's series, *Women Composers – A Graded Anthology For Piano* (Schott Music) recently won the Presto Music Award for best 'New Series Of The Year'. She teaches the piano at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama and at Eton College.

DANIEL GRIMWOOD enjoys a solo and chamber career, with repertoire ranging from Elizabethan Virginal music to works of living composers, performing in such venues as Wigmore Hall and Queen Elizabeth Hall (London) and Gnessin Halls (Moscow). He was the first artist to record on the Edition Records Sounds label. As editor and writer, Grimwood is currently preparing editions of John Field and Adolph von Henselt.
Read Daniel Grimwood's lesson

CORDELIA WILLIAMS has performed worldwide and is particularly known for her understanding of the music of Schubert and Schumann. Her fifth album, *Cascade*, was released in September 2023. Her first book, *The Happy Music Play Book*, was written for parents of young children and received Book of the Year at the Presto Music Awards 2021. She shares practice insights, tips and vlogs at \
Read Cordelia Williams' lesson

CHENYIN LI is a celebrated concert pianist known for her fiery and intelligent performances of a wide variety of repertoire. Having won multiple international competitions, she has established herself as a versatile player who shines in both solo repertoire as well as concerto. Chenyin has performed in many prestigious venues across the UK, Europe and Asia and her extensive discography includes more than 60 albums for *Pianist*.
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SCORES

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Piece in A minor

26 **SPANSWICK**
Christmas Rock

27 **SMETANA**
No 2 from *Treasury of Melodies* Vol 2

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Waltz for Merete

29 **NIELSEN**
A Dream about 'Silent Night'

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In the Bleak Midwinter

62 **SCHUMANN**
The Prophet Bird, No 7 from *Forest Scenes* Op 82

Music typeset by Beautiful Setting

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HENSELT REPOS D'AMOUR OP 2 NO 4

A ravishing tone and a penchant for asynchronicity are just two qualities needed in order to bring this love duet to life, says Henselt advocate **Daniel Grimwood**

Adolph Henselt was born in 1814 in the tranquil town of Schwabach, a few miles south of Nuremberg. Shortly after his family moved to Munich in 1817 he took up the violin, but in 1823 began piano studies under Eduard Lasser, a tenor at the Hoftheater München, who's own teacher, the illustrious Josepha von Fladt, would become his teacher.

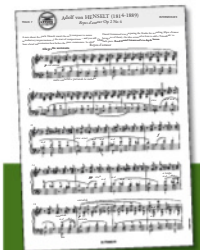
In 1831 King Ludwig awarded Henselt a scholarship to study with Hummel in Weimar. We can surmise from German writer Ida Marie Lipsius's *Studienköpfe* that the young student found the brilliant yet ageing Hummel a little stifling, but Mozart's illustrious pupil had sufficient confidence in the young Henselt to present him at Court in a concert performing Hummel's own A flat Concerto. In 1833 Henselt moved to Vienna where he took lessons in counterpoint and theory from the celebrated theoretician, Simon Sechter. It was here, inspired by a performance of Sigismond Thalberg – a pianist similarly renowned for his singing tone – that he set himself upon a rigorous course of work, occasionally practising 16 hours a day in order to become a fully-fledged virtuoso.

Following rapturous responses to his performances, Henselt toured Europe and eventually took up residence in St Petersburg at the invitation of the Tsar. He would become teacher to the Royal children – the remainder of his life became ever more devoted to education. He was held in such high esteem in his adopted homeland that he became the general music inspector, was appointed to the Royal Russian Privy Council and was named Adolph Lvovich von Henselt by Tsar Alexander II.

The Etudes

Henselt's two sets of Etudes, the *12 Etudes caractéristiques* Op 2 and *12 Etudes de salon* Op 5, were composed in 1837 at lightning speed. They were published in 1837 and 1838 – the year Henselt moved to Russia – and they certainly established his position as a preeminent composer of his generation.

Whilst the two opuses appear to have been composed simultaneously and are cut from similar cloth, there are differences between the two: Firstly, the Op 2 has a somewhat more uniform style than Op 5. Also, each Op 2 etude is headed with a poetic aphorism in French, whereas Op 5 is more sparsely titled in German. Henselt may have a reputation for fierce virtuosity but in both opuses there are a handful of etudes which revel in beauty over dexterity – *Repos d'amour* being a fine example.


SEE SCORES SECTION

Legacy

The foundations for a busy and successful career were laid, though not necessarily as a composer. The towering success of his career as an educator may speak to us less directly than any subsequent achievements as a composer have done, but no less saliently, because his role in the establishment of what we now call the Russian Piano School simply cannot be overemphasised.

Henselt was vastly influential, in large part through the Etudes, which became standard repertoire for many pianists of the 19th century. That such a small output could have such a seminal effect on the progress of subsequent Russian composers is in itself remarkable. That he is less performed that the music of other later composers that he fertilised is a tragedy. Those who become familiar with his works will find themselves under no illusion that he was part of the bedrock of the Russian Romantic piano style. Those who become familiar with his technical quirks and unique sense of keyboard sonority will recognise the formative pedagogical effect he had (and has) on the

© Emily Brown

school of playing itself. It is gratifying to find Henselt's music quoted in Russian pianist and teacher Vasily Safonov's excellent manual on piano playing, the *New Formula*, alongside the more familiar name of Chopin. Safonov studied at the St Petersburg Conservatoire between 1881-1885, just two years before Henselt took up his teaching position there, and it is highly likely they knew each other. The fact that Safonov taught Rosina and Josef Lhévinne, Scriabin and Medtner speaks for itself.

Repos d'amour Op 2 No 4

A melody in the tenor floats between the plainest of bass lines and soft off-beat chords – a texture that was clearly much beloved of Henselt. Perhaps he enjoyed the naïve folk-like simplicity of it. Or perhaps it provides a clue to a characteristic of his fabled and much written about depth of tone. A melody note sings out alone before being joined by the rest of the chord. Anyone familiar with recordings of pianists from the start of the gramophone era will recognise that asynchronicity was an expressive tool; many pianists can be heard playing a melody note both more loudly than, and slightly earlier than, the rest of the chord or accompaniment.

The tenor melody is joined on its repeat by a soprano descant at bar 19, and toward the end the bass also develops melodic properties from bar 35 onwards, so that what begins with utmost simplicity develops almost imperceptibly into triple counterpoint with chordal accompaniment.

The most oft mentioned characteristic of Henselt's playing was his glorious *cantabile* and legato touch. Liszt entreated his students to 'find out the secret of Henselt's hands', and, in her book *My Musical Experiences*, English amateur pianist Bettina Walker, who spent time with Henselt in Russia, recalled him saying:

> '...I have told pupils to think that they are going to sink their fingers into dough'. This is but one instance of Henselt's abhorrence of anything inelastic. 'An ass,' he said once, 'can give the notes a knock like that!'

A fine balance

A good way to work on the piece is to treat it like any counterpoint and to practise all voices separately, and in all combinations. For example, at bars 35-37, where the tenor line is shared between the hands, try playing only the soprano line in the RH and the tenor together alone and only add the other parts when it sounds smooth. During such moments, pay particular attention to a strict legato where the line is shared across the two hands.

Liszt entreated his students to 'find out the secret of Henselt's hands'

Then practise the piece complete but with the syncopated chords missing. These can be added starting with the fingers brushing the keys but with no sound, and gradually increasing the dynamic so that we learn how to grade the dynamic below the voices. As with all things off-beat, there is an element of syncopation – and as with all things syncopated, there is an element of written-out rubato. Imagining the accompaniment

being notated like this will help keep a flexible beat. Throughout, listen carefully and make sure that the sound you create in the melodies is gorgeous. This is helped if you imagine a distance between voice and accompaniment – rather like a diva under the spotlight on an opera stage and an orchestra busy in the pit providing an immaculately prepared yet discreet support.

Pulse and pedal

A correct tempo for any piece is a speed that enables us to say what we wish to say. The amorous nature of this Etude requires space for the melodies to unfold voluptuously. Taken too fast there is a danger the offbeat chords can sound a bit 'oom-pah' – needless to say, this must be avoided at all costs. Remind yourself what you need to do in the last ten or so bars before you play bar 1.

A common difficulty in Henselt is where exactly to pedal. Few of us have hands large enough to stretch all of his tenths – I certainly don't – and it can be easy for the harmonies to blur. Bars 27 and 28 are good examples of this: I am unable to play the LH tenths. We need to make sure that the bass note is caught in the pedal and that the harmony is not carried across from the previous chord. In general, where we have to arpeggiate chords it is helpful to create a default of arpeggiating *on* the beat rather than before. This may feel unnatural at first, but do persevere; Henselt's generation of musicians still studied thorough bass and understood music as being laid over its bass line. Enjoy! ■

Daniel Grimwood plays Repos d'amour *on this issue's album. The track is extracted from his* Henselt Complete Études *album on Edition Peters/Faber Music (EPS008).*

ABILITY RATING INTERMEDIATE/ADVANCED

SCHUMANN THE PROPHET BIRD

Cordelia Williams guides you through one of Schumann's most evocative works where the softest of sounds and myriad colours will help bring this mysterious creature to life

Schumann's *Forest Scenes* (*Waldszenen*) are a wonderful example of what we might call 'high Romanticism', not in the sense of romantic love but in the sense of an intense identification with the natural world. After the glories of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, Romantic art rebelliously dwells on our connection, our oneness, with nature. Elements of the natural world take on human meaning and emotional significance, commenting on and reflecting the individual's experience: a nightingale serenades the beloved, flowers are 'lonely' or companionable, the stars want to console a broken heart.

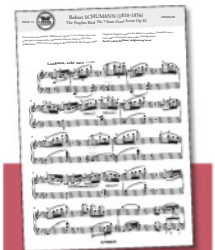
In number 7, *The Prophet Bird* (*Vogel als Prophet*), Schumann devotes his attention to the swooping, fluttering and trilling of a single bird in the forest. In some ways the bird is carefree, its warbling song uplifting to the listener. But what does this 'prophet bird' know that we don't? Like the best film scores, its song gives a feeling of unease and portent. Schumann walks a knife-edge between the serious and the light-hearted, which makes this piece endlessly fascinating and rewarding to play.

My priority here is to search for the most innovative use of sound and colour in order to create an ephemeral, shimmering effect. The music should never be pedestrian, certain or fixed, but fluid and changeable, shifting colours and character from bar to bar. You will also need subtle pedalling – try half-changing the pedal where necessary, so as to clear any unpleasant clashes but still maintain the echoing eerie effect of slight blurring. *The Prophet Bird* is not too challenging technically (in the most basic sense) but provides a wonderful opportunity to explore sound production and to challenge pianistic control and exquisite listening.

A bird's life

Give yourself creative freedom in the shaping of the bird's swooping flight as it rises and falls. Play with where the melody tumbles forwards and where it is left hanging in the silence. For example, in bar 1 I feel the top D propels us forwards to the next bar, while in bar 2 the top D is left gently hovering. Then bar 3 only tentatively starts moving forwards. In the second phrase, by contrast, bar 5 might have less forward momentum, while bar 6 leads us more determinedly to the F major cadence in bar 8. From bar 13's upbeat the lines really tumble forwards, right up until bar 16.

You can experiment with different uses of the fingers and fingertips to create these effects. Fast, 'bright' fingertips might be suitable for the third beats of bar 1 and 5, and for the fluttering activity of bars 9-12, while a soft and fluid hand and fingers will help to create gentleness when you phrase off e.g. bar 2, bar 4, bars 17-18. In bar 13, I treat the *fp* markings as swellings rather than accents (conjuring up the heady rising and falling of the bird's flight), but the second beat of bar 14 is harsh with the clashing F♮ and F♯, so I do give that one more of a dig! Bar 15 piles emphasis upon emphasis, which I really enjoy bringing out with quite some sharpness and drama, as a hint of some darker threat.



SEE SCORES SECTION

Filigree moments

In the service of such creative freedom, it will help to unpick the technique of those demi-semiquaver 'grace note' groups. It's important that these sound light and natural, fitting in easily to the larger shape of the melody rather than getting in the way. The demi-semis should always be slightly quieter than the main notes (e.g. the C♯ and D crochets, in bar 1). The notated rhythm is ambiguous: it could represent a dotted quaver

© Benjamin Ealovega

followed by three triplet demi-semiquavers, or a quaver tied to the first of a group of four demi-semiquavers. Try both options and see which feels natural to you. I am flexible – some of the groups I play midway between the two options, and some tend towards one or the other. This depends on the momentum of the melody and harmony at that moment.

In order to achieve lightness and neatness in the demi-semiquavers, you can practise them staccato (using finger staccato to strengthen the lifting action of each finger, rather than wrist staccato which bounces up and down). Then practise smooth, slow and relaxed; then slow, strong and heavy. Once you have mastered these different practice versions, let go of any technical thoughts and just let the grace notes play themselves, focusing instead on the movement from upbeat to second crochet.

Mysteries of the forest

Once you've begun work on this layer of expression, you could add a layer of atmosphere and magic – even a sense of the supernatural – by exploring the very quietest sounds the piano has to offer. I challenge you to play the quietest possible note. Then take this as your starting point, further reducing the volume until the note is inaudible (try it at different registers, with different fingers and with chords too). This often opens up a much greater dynamic range than anticipated, and *The Prophet Bird* offers the perfect chance to use some of these hushed sounds. It takes work to utilise such dynamics effectively, as you must balance quietness with clarity and quality of sound (whatever effect you seek, the note must still sound properly and evenly). The first upbeat of the piece sets the sound-world, so give care to the sound you want to open with. I aim for quite a soft, giving touch – not too harsh a sound – but fast action to give clarity and a slight edge. This is uneasy rather than beautiful music. Let the sound spin around the piano and the room.

In a similar way, look for opportunities for new pianistic colours in the LH's harmonies by altering the balance of a chord. More on the top voice will create a brighter, more positive sound, more in the bass will sound darker or give an empty, haunted quality, while to create a thick, rich texture you can give more equal weight to all the voices. I tend towards this latter option in bar 9 (F7) and bar 12 (C minor cadence), for example. Likewise, experiment with special opportunities offered by the LH's bass notes. I like to give the D in bar 29 a hint of a tolling bell – a shiver of doom as the piece progresses. You may equally like a more down-to-earth effect on the low F in bar 33. Spend some time playing around with these options and see what catches your imagination.

'Schumann walks a knife-edge between the serious and the light-hearted'

Brief, yet heavenly

The middle section gives us the most beautiful chorale – we know Schumann was devoted to Bach and highly influenced by his music, and these six short bars are just captivating. Seek out simplicity in your shaping. Each phrase should breathe and expand in an organic way (and of course the overlapping tenor melodies must also be beautifully turned) but don't be tempted to push and pull it around too much. Just let it unfold. I tend to let the first two bars meander fairly neutrally, then let the tenor emerge in bars 21-22. 'Etwas langsamer' in bars 23-24 is the heart of the entire piece: a moment of extreme purity which never fails to take my breath away with its radiant, halting shock. Work towards perfection in the balance of the RH chords, and the most spell-binding sound possible, thinking about what the unexpected modulation to E♭ means in your interpretation. *Verschiebung* – una corda – is marked explicitly here, so be *very* sparing in its use elsewhere (if you use it at all, which I don't).

Three specific tips:

1. It's hard to transition from one section to the next in bar 18. Avoid a bump on the first chord of the chorale by thinking through to the second beat of bar 19. Imagine that the chorale has already started and you are simply joining in.

2. As the initial birdsong material gets started again after the chorale, there is a gift of a moment in bar 26 with the C7 chord, which is a new addition. I like to gently spread the chord so that the harmony glows and opens out the emotion of the piece.

3. Lastly, I believe the ending should be absolutely understated. Whatever omen or foreshadowing the prophet may have brought, in the last two bars maybe it is, after all, just a bird. Look for simplicity of sound and of pulse, the very minimum ritenuto (if any at all), and allow the last bar to evaporate like the most delicate of bubbles. ■

Cordelia Williams plays The Prophet Bird *on this issue's album. The extract comes from her new release,* Cascade, *on Somm Recordings (SOMMCD 0675).*

ABILITY RATING LATE BEGINNER

SMETANA

PIECE IN G, NO 2 FROM TREASURY OF MELODIES

Lots to absorb within this short 32-bar waltz, says **Melanie Spanswick**, who offers advice on how to get the Czech-style accents spot-on and to allow time for rubato

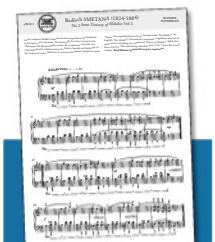
Key G major **Tempo** Allegretto **Style** Romantic
Will improve your ✓ *Cantabile* ✓ Melodic shaping ✓ Rubato

This charming little waltz was written by the Czech composer Bedřich Smetana (1824-84). It comes from two volumes entitled *Poklad Melodií* (*Treasury of Melodies*). I like to call it a Waltz in G, as it reflects the character, and will hopefully encourage development of the waltz 'lilt'. The tempo marking of a dotted minim equals 60 beats per minute allows the music to flow nicely without feeling rushed.

Separate hand practice will help secure the LH's accompaniment part. I suggest practising in chordal patterns: for example, in bars 1-3, play blocked-out chords – that is, playing all notes in the bar together, which will ensure swift assimilation of notes and fingerings. When playing as written, aim for a deeper touch on the first note of every bar, keeping subsequent beats lighter. For added support, move the wrist and hand a fraction to the left whilst playing the first note of the bar. When playing the second and third beats, make sure that the notes of the two-note chords are played at exactly the same moment by keeping fingers close to the keys, depressing them lightly for a softer colour and dance-like style.

Arm weight in the RH will help project the melodic line. When practising the RH's melody, use the wrist as a 'hinge', allowing it to move freely, so that weight from the arm can by fully utilised. Allow each finger to delve deeply to the bottom of the key, or key-bed, using a firm touch, and try to 'cushion' the sound at the moment of impact with a rotational wrist motion. When this technique is used in conjunction with weight from the arm, the result is a richer, more sonorous, tone. The LH accompaniment should be significantly quieter so that the tune can soar.

Moments of rubato allow for a breathing space before the start of a new phrase



SEE SCORES SECTION

The RH melody requires careful shaping. The top of each phrase must be given shape and direction as well as a smooth legato touch. On the third beat of bars 2, 10, 26, and 30, the melody moves to its highest point (e.g. the G in bar 2). Adding a small crescendo at the beginning of the bar moving up to a 'leaning' into the key on that third beat will benefit the shaping of the melody, offering the waltz 'swing', before landing with a fairly strong touch on the D in the following bar. This way of emphasising certain notes within a phrase also occurs on the third-beat C in bar 4, the third-beat C♯ in bar 14, as well as on the first-beat B in bar 19 and the first-beat C♯ in bar 23.

Rubato will help shape the melody. Passages such as those in the RH at bars 8, 16, 24, 32-33 and in the LH at bar 20 need rubato – which means 'robbed' time or taking time for expressive effect. At the end of bar 8, the C can be held a fraction longer with the following C♯ held even longer still, before returning to a regular pulse at the start of bar 9. These moments of rubato allow for breathing space before a new phrase as well as enhancing the Romantic style. Note: the RH staccatos on the last line of music should be played with a non-legato approach to the notes rather than a detached, sharp touch, which would disturb the smooth line.

LEARNING TIP

The sustaining pedal provides a wonderful resonance throughout and must be used freely – aim for one lift per bar.

The LH fingering might seem unnatural between bars 13-14. But it does work! On the third beat of bar 13 aim to keep the fourth finger depressed on the D whilst quickly swivelling the hand over, landing on the E and C♯ with the thumb and third finger on the first beat of bar 14. This movement should eventually feel comfortable and allows for a smoother motion and a legato effect. This 'swivel' movement will also be useful in the RH in the penultimate bar (32). ■

www.melaniespanswick.com

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TRACK 1

Heinrich WOHLFAHRT (1797-1883)

Piece in A minor

BEGINNER

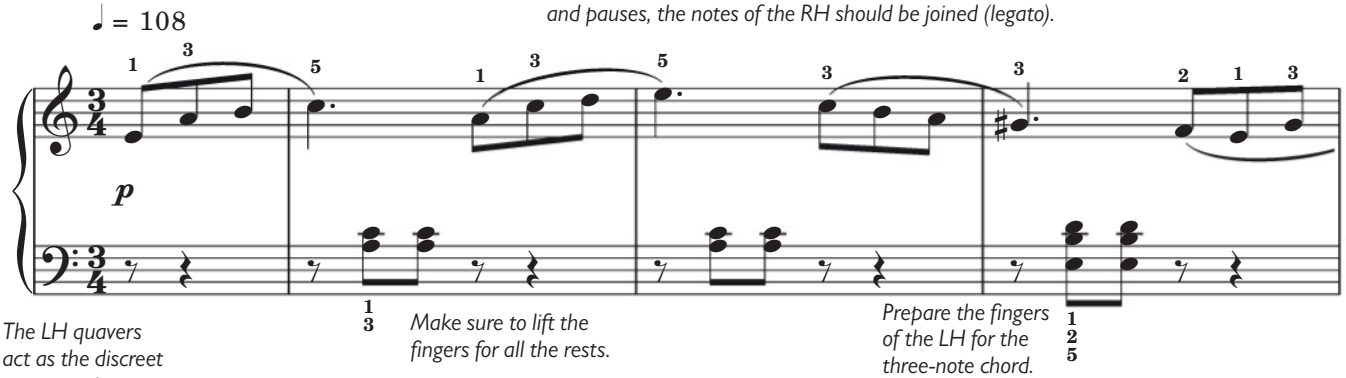
German Romantic composer Heinrich Wohlfahrt received his education in Weimar and upon the completion of his studies became a tutor and cantor. He became celebrated as an educator, publishing a large number of small educational works including *Kinder Klavierschule*, *Der erste Klavierunterricht*, *der Klavierfreund* and more. His sons Franz and Robert became popular piano teachers in Leipzig and also published instructive elementary works for piano.

Look at the technical tips within the score.

The key is A minor; note the G sharp which appears throughout. The key of A minor is poignant, full of longing, so try to reflect that in your interpretation.

Notice how the dynamics are quiet throughout. This is a good exercise, therefore, for soft playing.

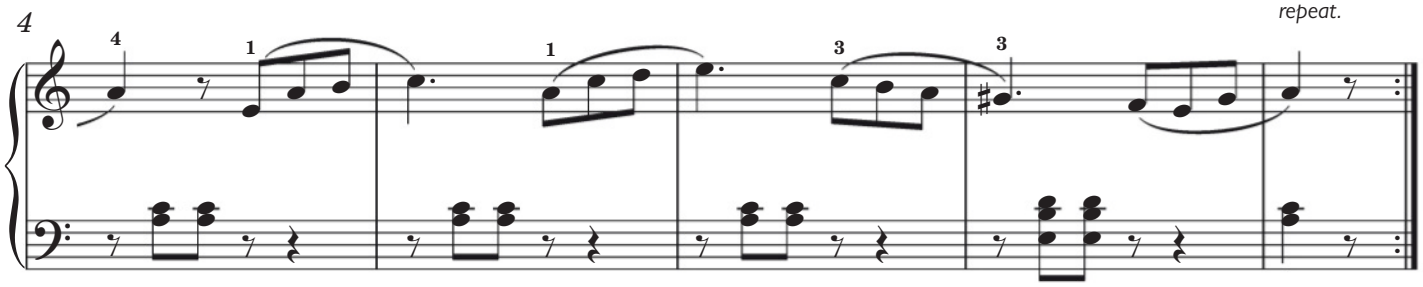
Shape the RH four-note groups, always moving towards the dotted crotchet of the next bar. Unlike the LH with all its rests and pauses, the notes of the RH should be joined (legato).



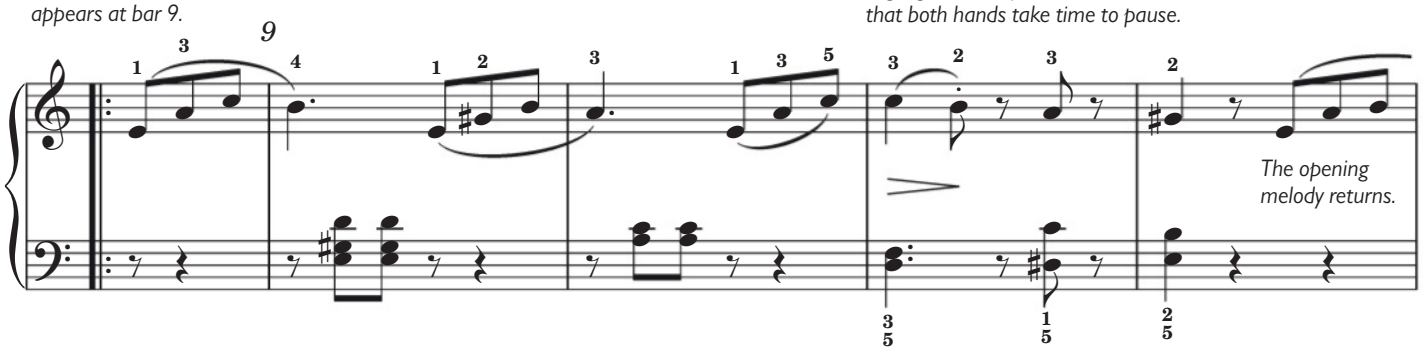
The LH quavers act as the discreet accompaniment.

Make sure to lift the fingers for all the rests.

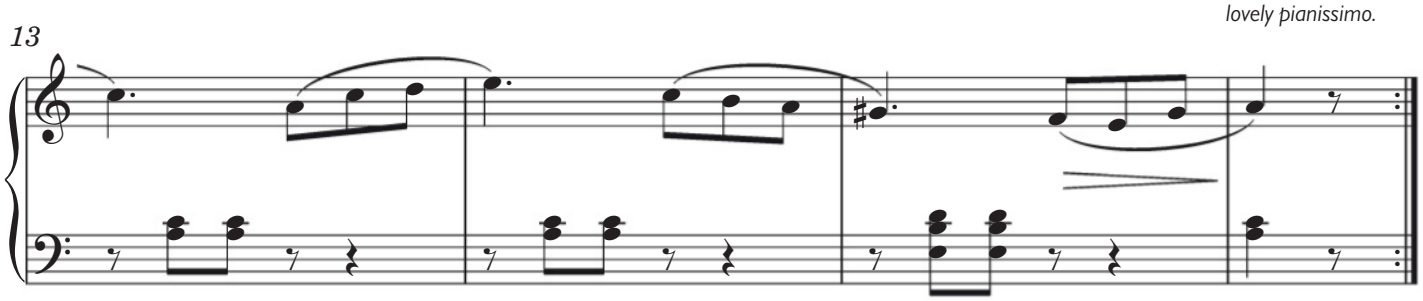
Prepare the fingers of the LH for the three-note chord.

Go back to the beginning and repeat.

New melodic material appears at bar 9.

Bar 11 to the start of bar 12 is the 'highlight' of the piece – it's the first time that both hands take time to pause.

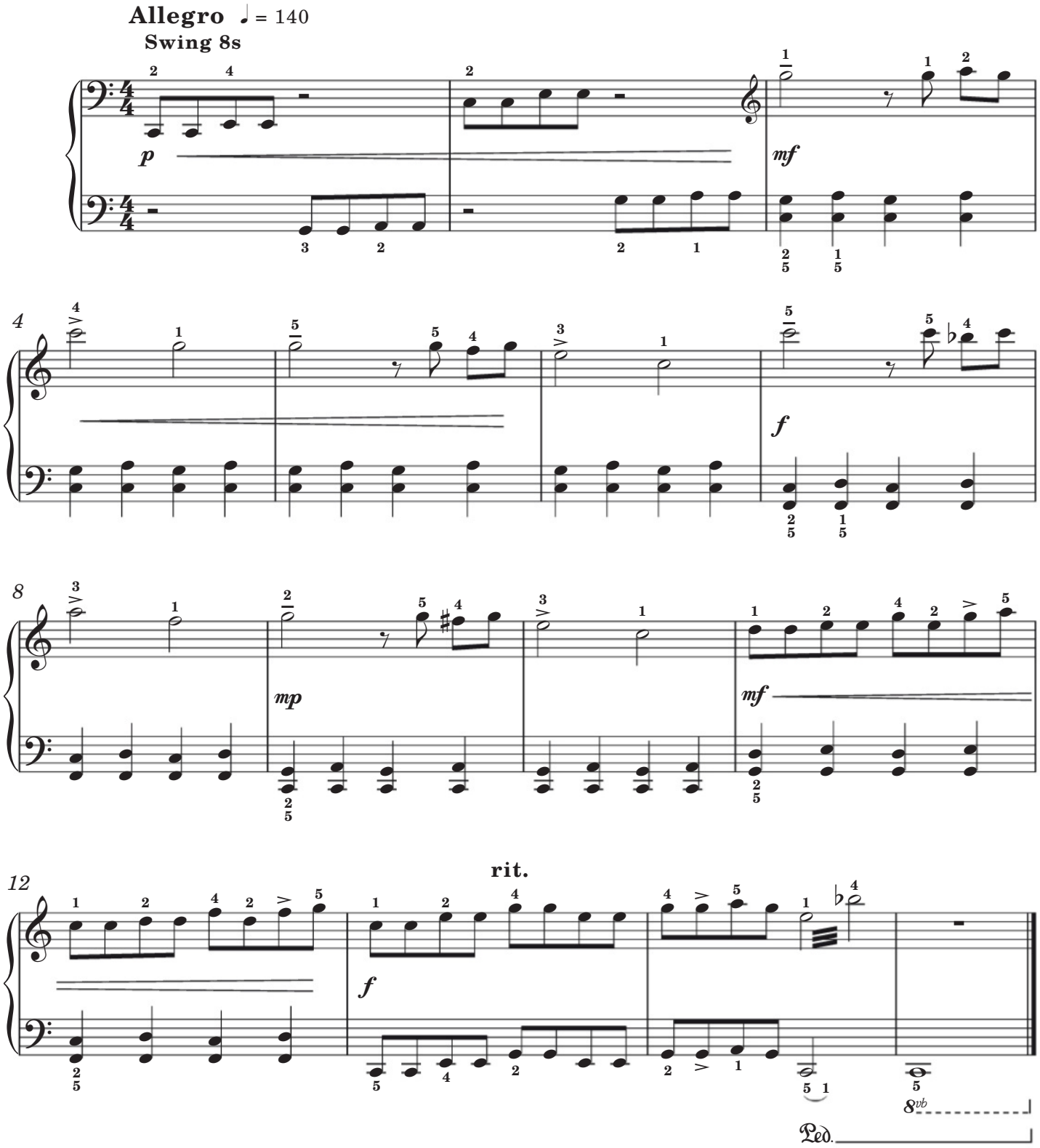


The opening melody returns.

On the repeat, taper off towards the end to create a lovely pianissimo.

Melanie SPANSWICK

Christmas Rock

Notes from the composer: *Christmas Rock* is a bluesy style piece based on the 12-bar blues pattern, which is an important and popular chord progression in contemporary music. This pattern is based on three basic triads, which are all seventh chords of I, IV and V. The 12 bars are generally built around the following pattern: four bars featuring chord I, followed by two bars featuring chord IV, then two more bars of the tonic chord (chord I), and two further bars of chord V, finishing with two bars of chord I. The pattern has been slightly altered here, as bars 11 and 12 feature chord V and then chord IV before returning to the tonic.

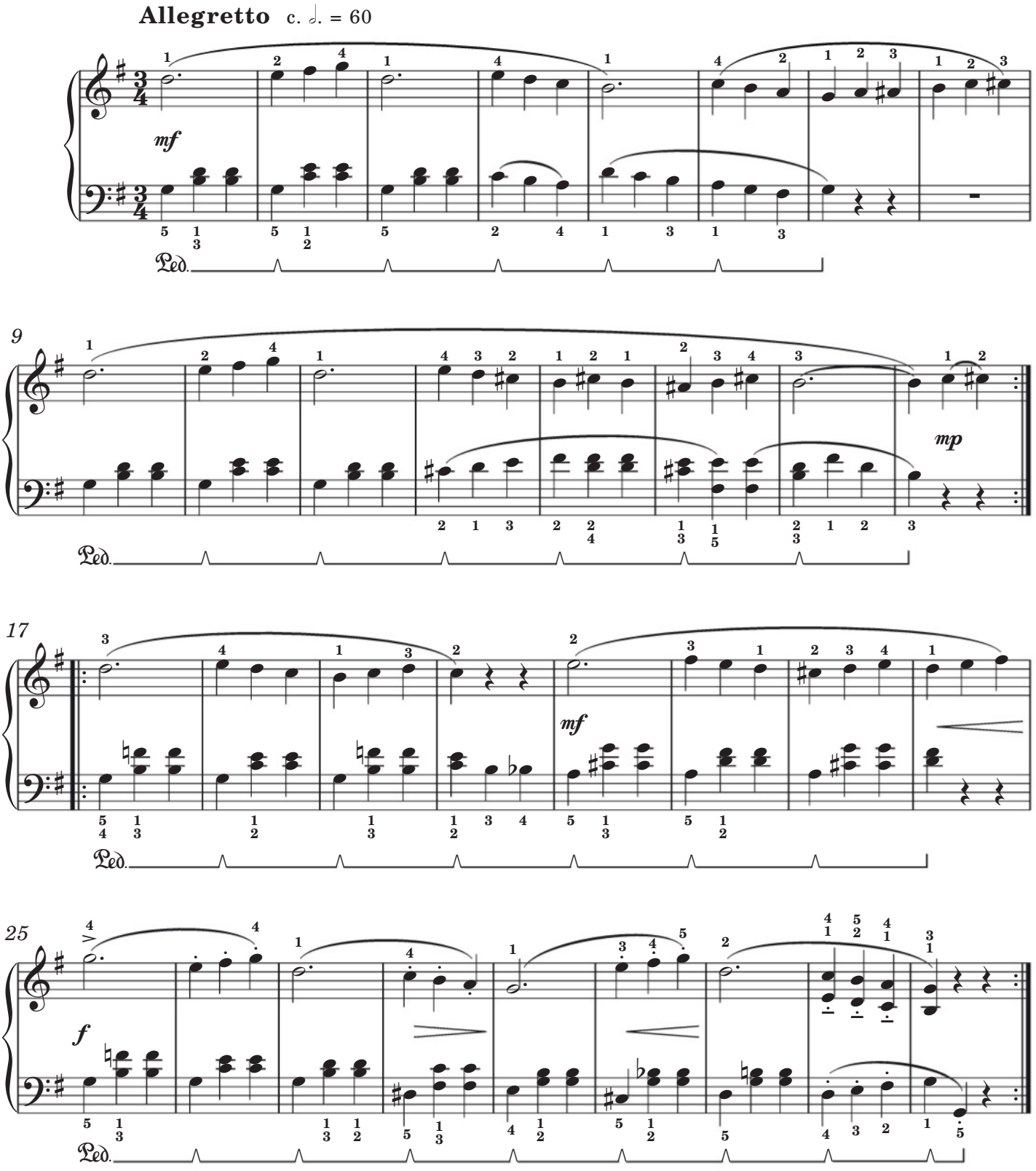
The melodic material is also based around these chord patterns. As is usual in this style, all quaver beats are 'swung', or played as part of a triplet, with the first quaver of the triplet beat played as a crotchet (or taking the first two quavers of the triplet), and the second, the final quaver. Elongation of the first note offers a laid-back, groovy 'swing' feel. Give the first note of the quaver pair a deeper, firmer touch and keep the second quaver light. Remember to pay attention to the tenuto markings and accents. In order to capture the 'rock' character, the LH two-note chords can be played fairly heavily with a strident touch, but in a steady tempo.

TRACK 3

DON'T MISS MELANIE SPANSWICK'S LESSON ON THIS PIECE

Bedřich SMETANA (1824-1884)

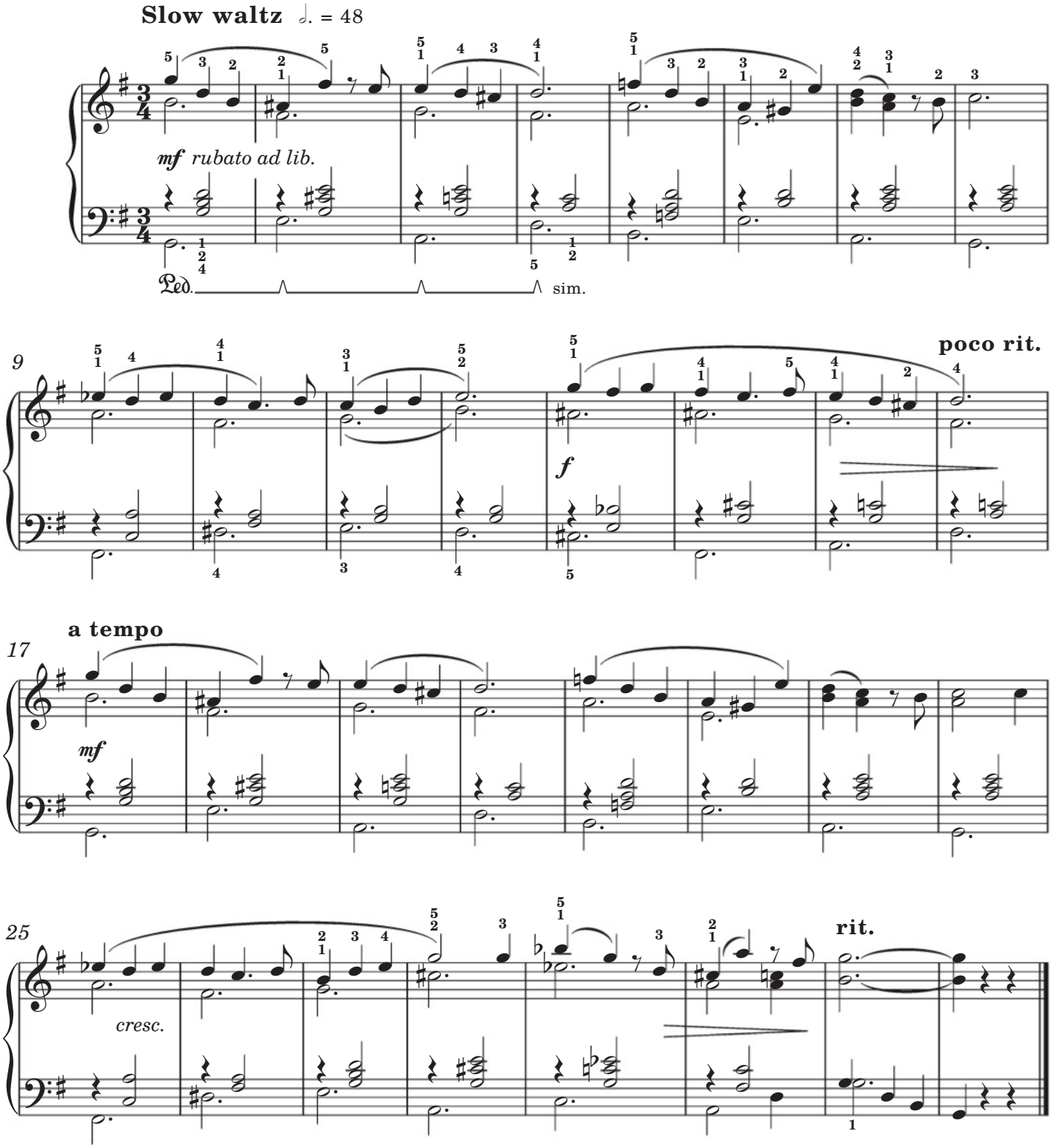
No 2 from *Treasury of Melodies* Vol 2

BEGINNER/ INTERMEDIATE

Czech composer Bedřich Smetana has been regarded in his homeland as the father of Czech music. Internationally he is best known for his 1866 opera *The Bartered Bride* and for the symphonic cycle *Má vlast* ('My Fatherland'), which portrays the history, legends and landscape of the composer's native Bohemia. It contains the famous symphonic poem 'Vltava', also popularly known by its German name 'Die Moldau' (in English, 'The Moldau'). Smetana also composed a significant amount of piano music, including two volumes of *Treasury of Melodies*, which date from 1849-50. This enchanting waltz-like piece is No 2 from the second volume. **Read Melanie Spanswick's step-by-step lesson.**

TRACK 4

Erik JOHANNESSEN
Waltz for Merete

BEGINNER/
INTERMEDIATE

Norwegian amateur composer Erik Johannessen was a runner-up in the 2023 *Pianist* Composing Competition. We found his piece full of sweet, whimsical qualities and thought many a reader would benefit and gain great enjoyment from learning it. Johannessen tells us that he wrote it as a melody for his wife Merete on her birthday, as she loves to dance. As for the piece itself, he tells us that he mostly plays it as written, but makes small pauses at the end of some of the phrases in order to add to the overall charm. Even if not marked on the score, the composer also advises that the LH second minim can sometimes be played as two repeated crotchets rather than the one minim (this is certainly not imperative, though). His thought process is that the player will be able to feel the alternation between 'floating' and 'pausing' within the short piece. We think Chenyin Li's interpretation on this issue's album is spot-on!
Pedal tips: One pedal change per bar.

TRACK 5

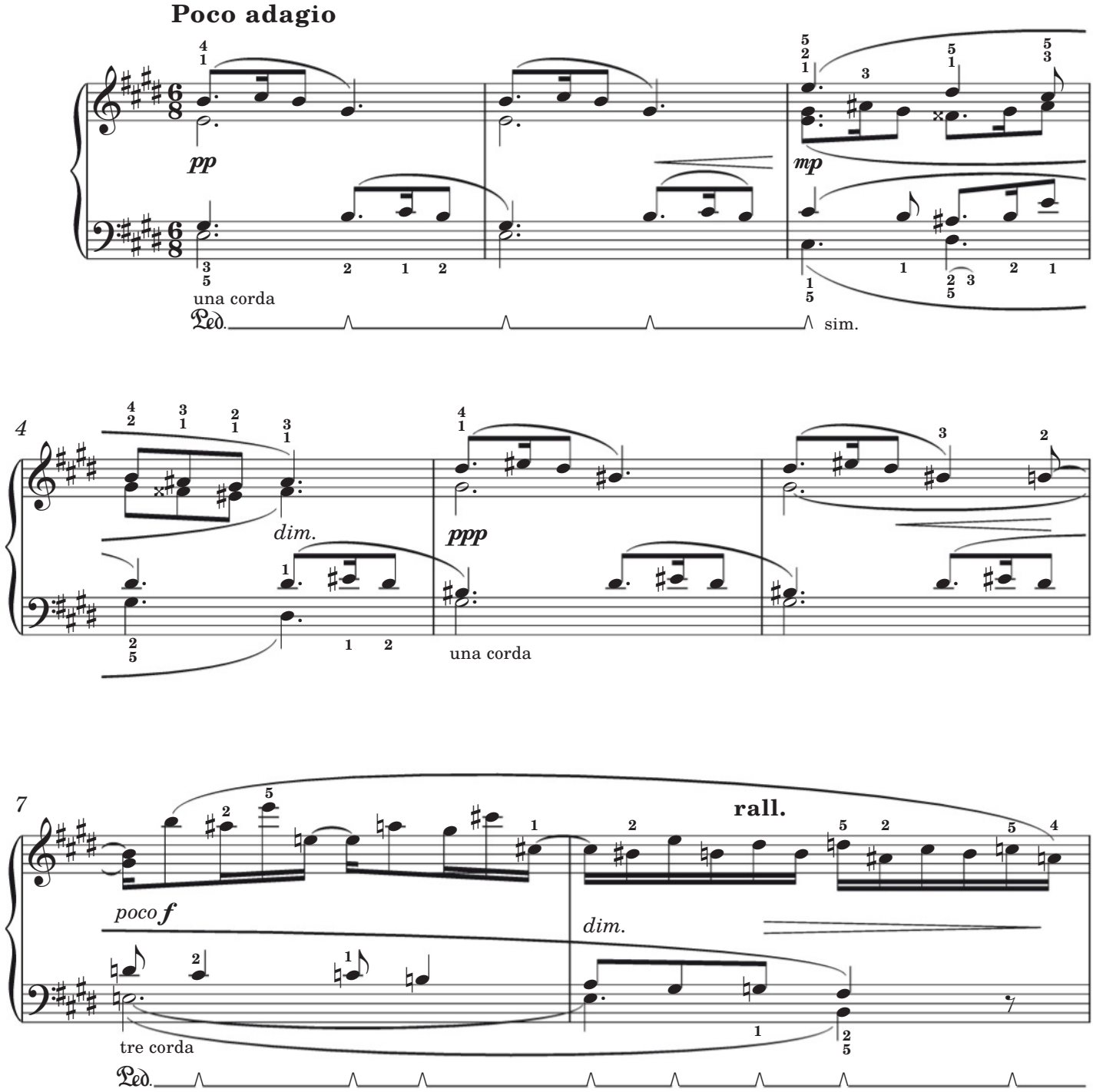
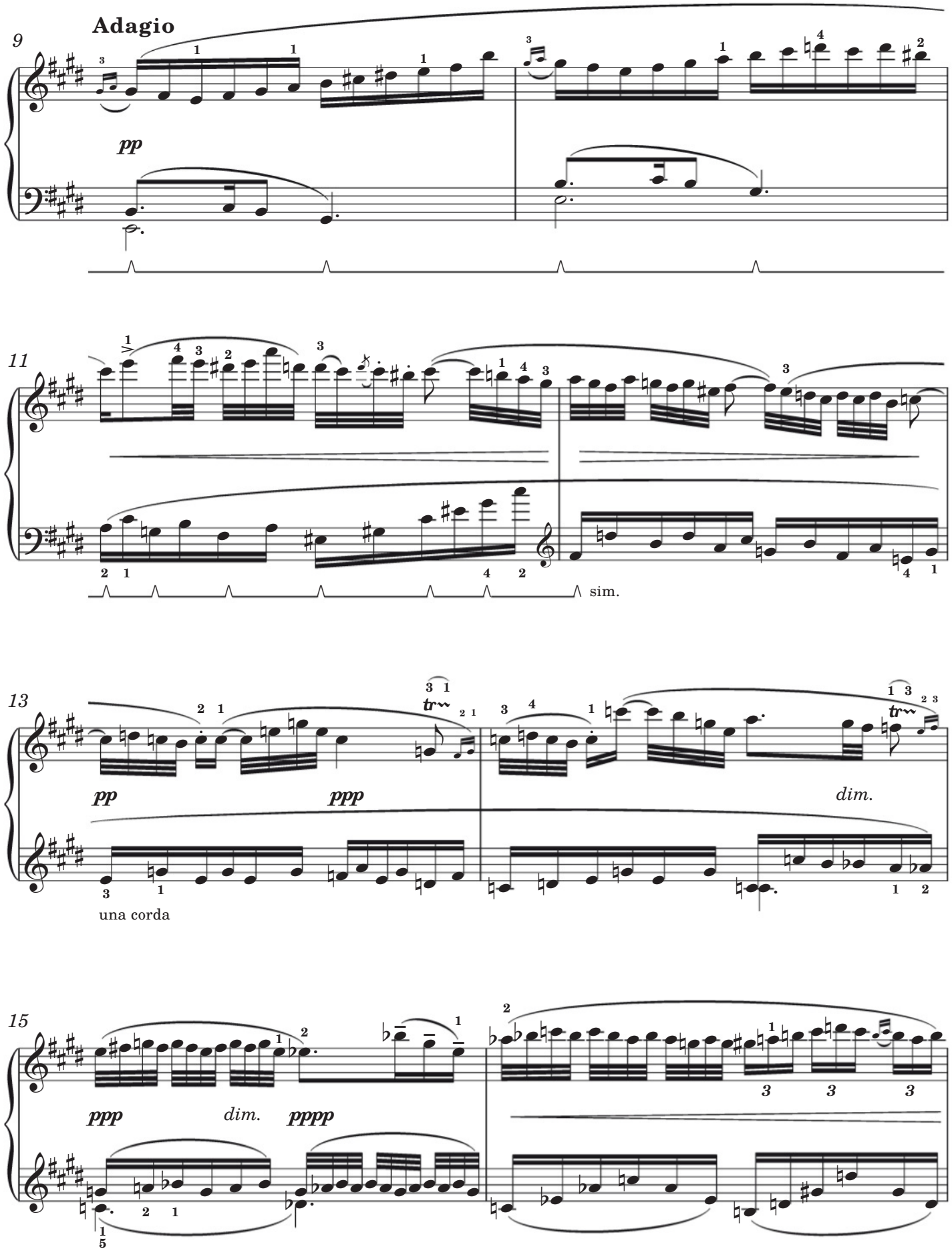
Carl NIELSEN (1865-1931)

A Dream about 'Silent Night'

INTERMEDIATE

Few pianists will be aware that Danish composer Carl Nielsen wrote works for solo piano. This one is a dreamy improvisation on the popular Christmas carol, *Silent Night*, originally written by Austrian composer Franz Xaver Gruber.

Playing tips: Here's a great example of a piece where you should *not* start learning the notes from bar 1! Start with the harder, more densly-textured areas first – such as bar 11 onwards. Take the hard sections and work on them separately, even if it's just mastering one bar at a time. Then you can build by adding a bar on either side, and so on. There's little doubt that the rhythm comes across as confusing in these florid bars; in such places, the metronome will help (either that, or the ability to maintain a firm pulse in your head!). Practise slowly, hands separately, maintaining a solid pulse. Then, when the notes are secure, start working on the music and interpretation, allowing for beautiful phrasing and soft dynamics. The end result? Effortless and magical.

Pedal tips: See markings on the score.

Adagio
9
pp
11
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13
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una corda
15
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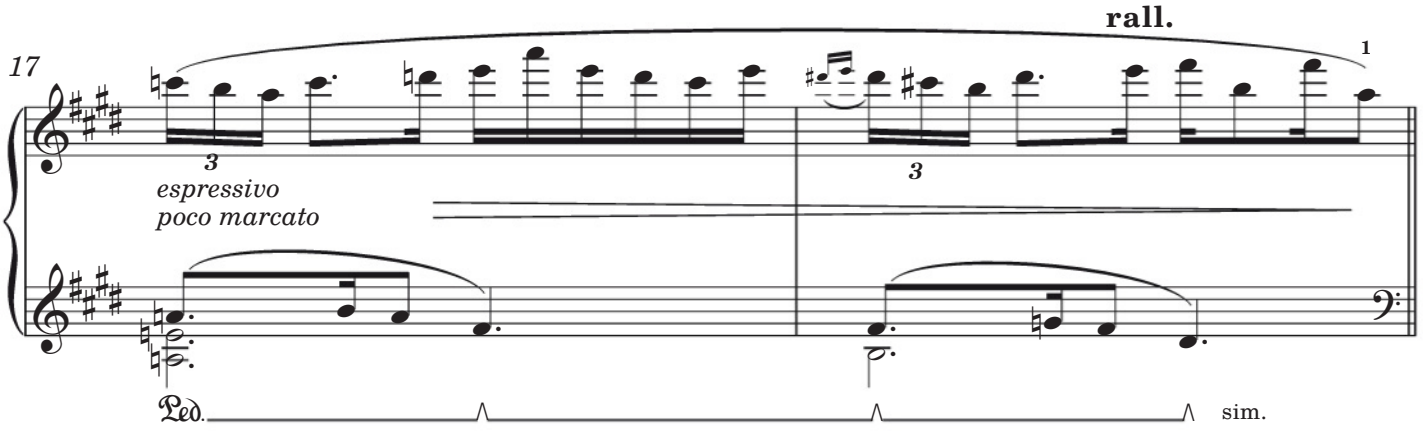
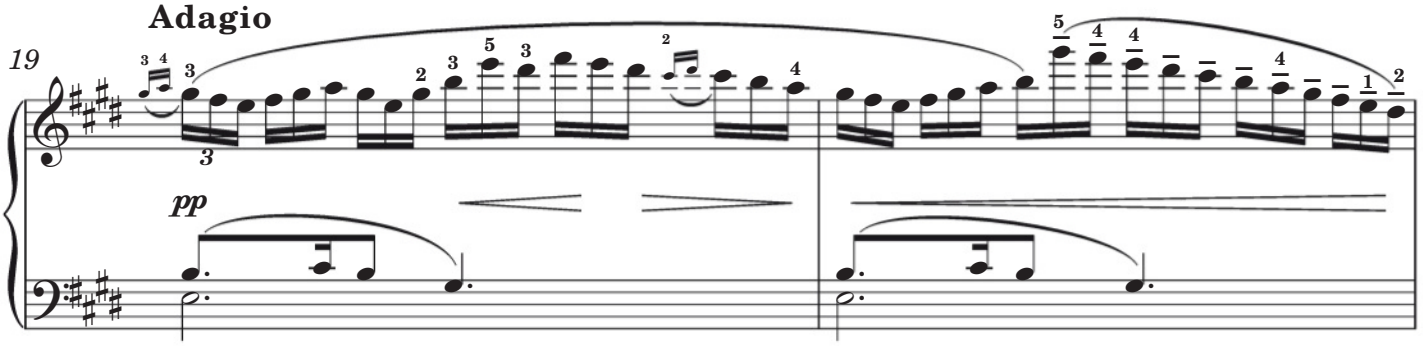

rall.
17
espressivo
poco marcato
Ped.
sim.


Adagio
19
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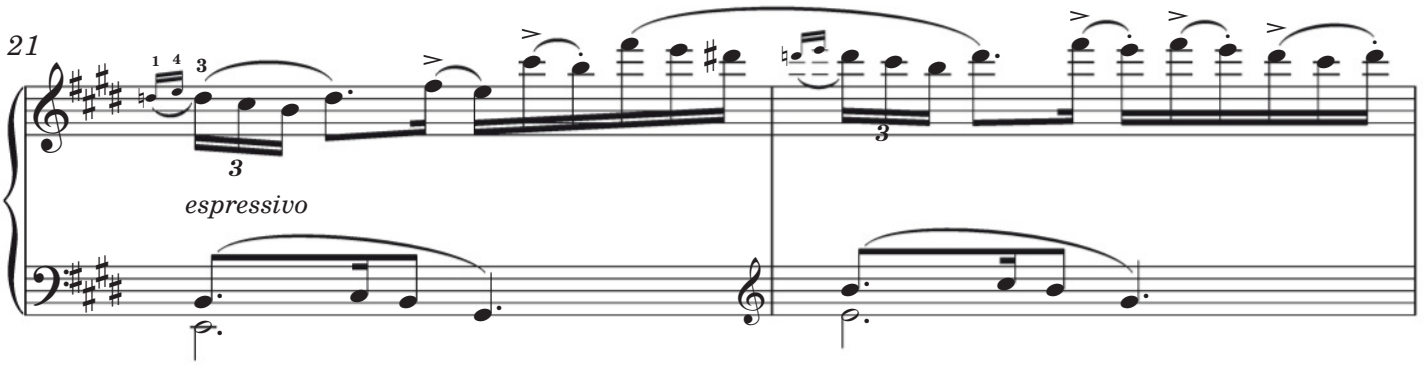
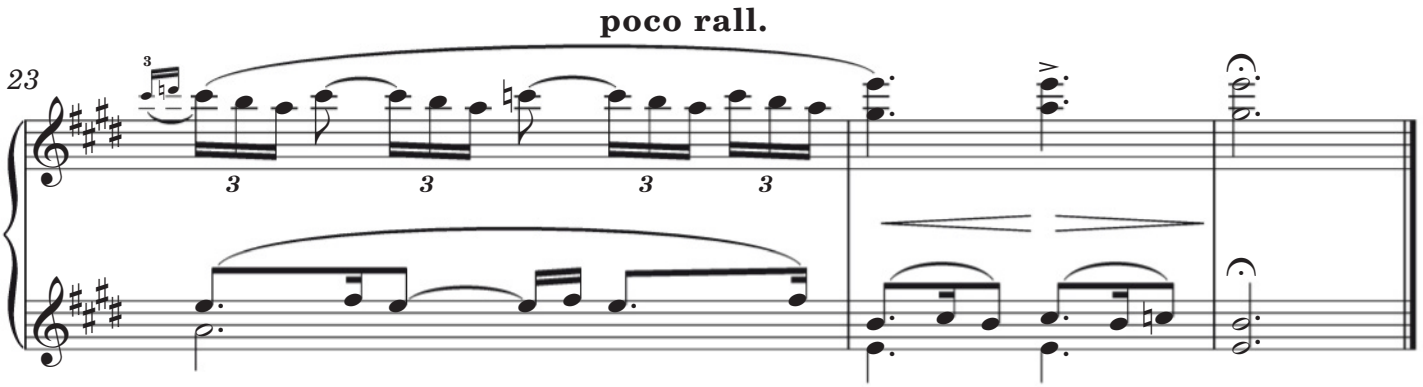

21
espressivo

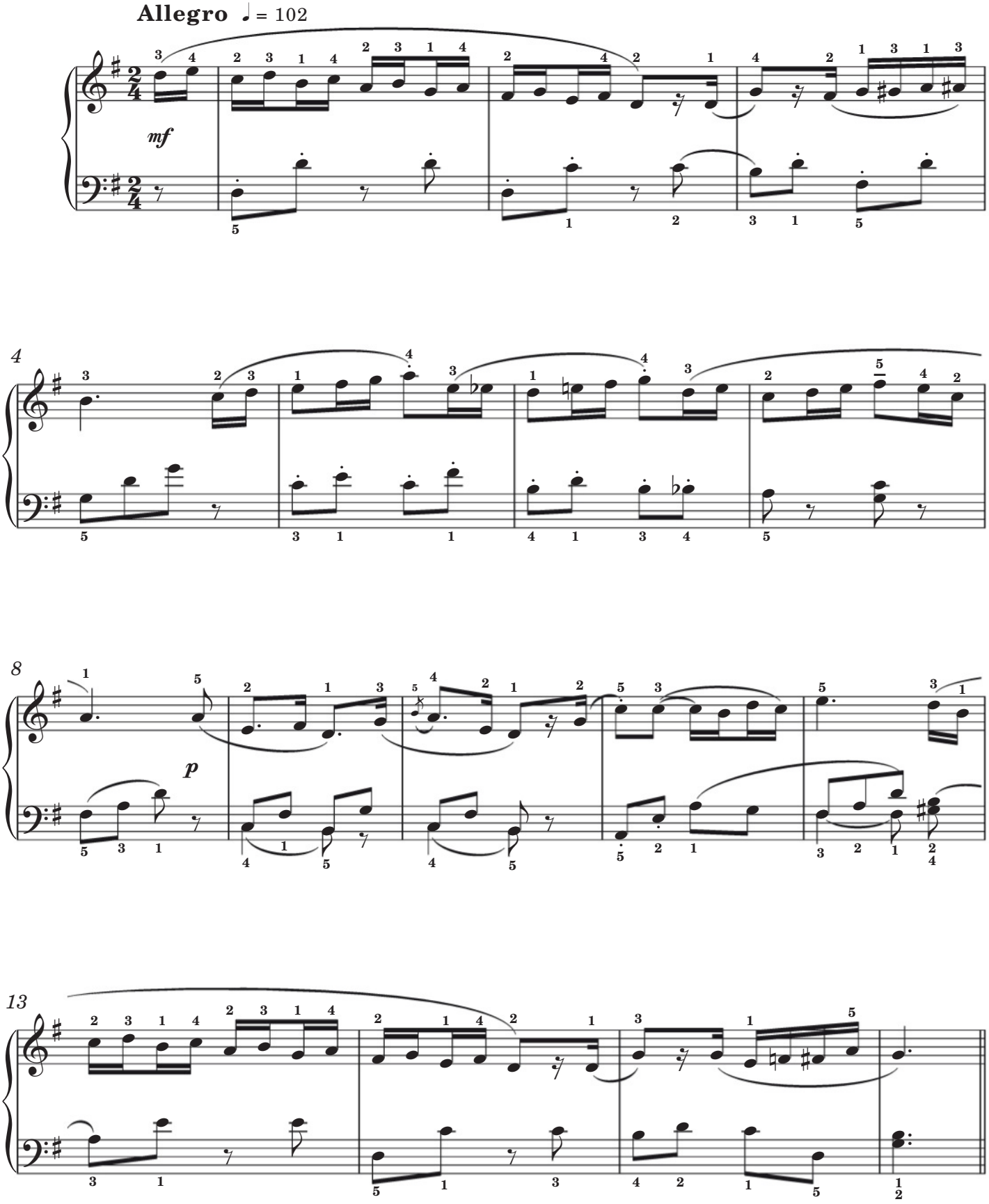
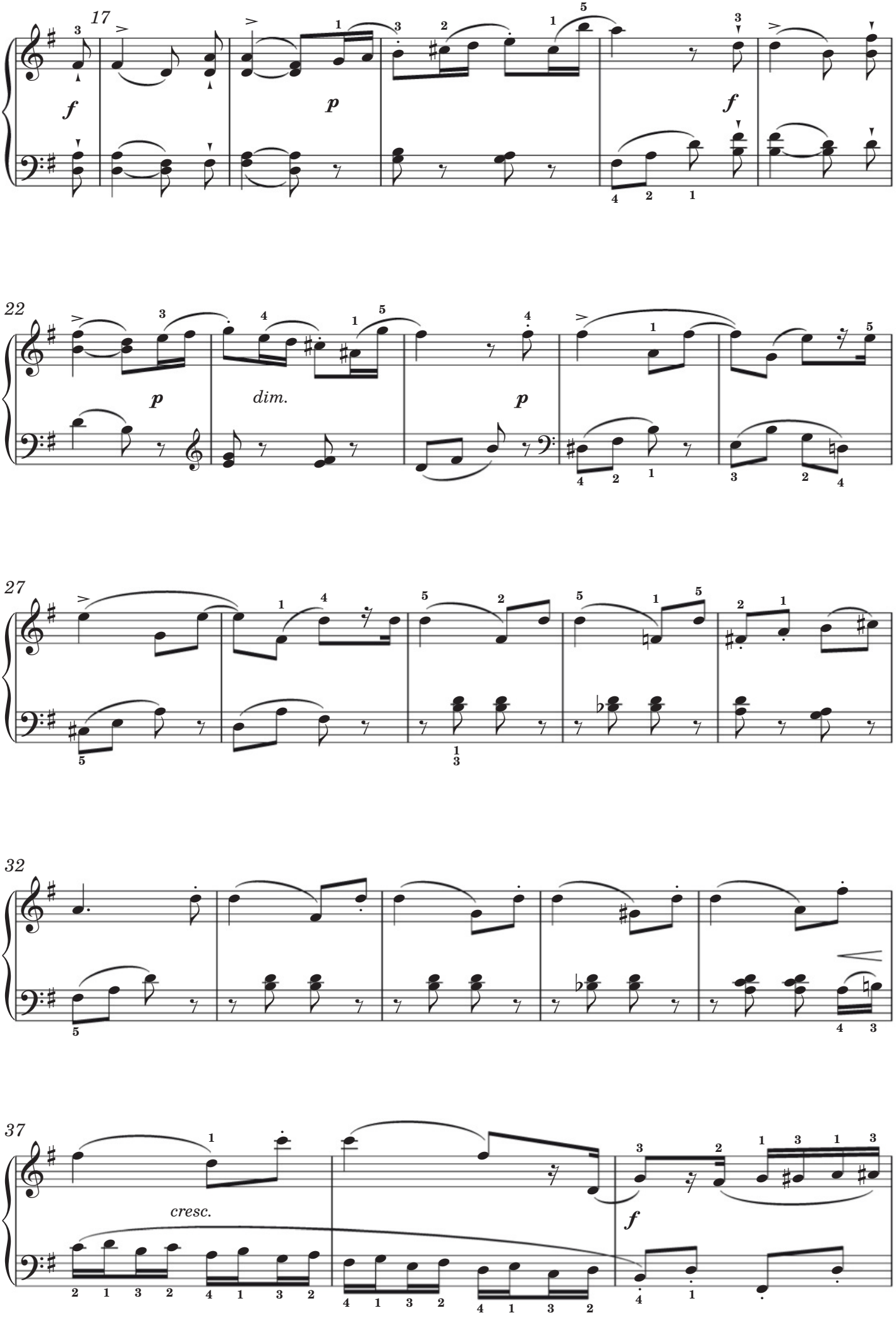

poco rall.
23

Edward ELGAR (1857-1934)

Sonatina, second movement

Elgar's short piano compositions, including the two-movement Sonatina, provided the composer with a steady income.

Playing tips: The semiquavers in bars 1-3, 37-40 and 75-80 need careful coordination and a sharp differentiation between legato and staccato where it occurs. Note the fingering for the semiquaver passages, because it determines a sequence of hand positions that is essential to the smooth playing of the semiquavers. The notion of dynamic contrasts is a key ingredient of the piece, because Elgar offsets the *f* chords in bars 17-18 with the *p* textures in bar 18. Pedal is not required.

Note: The first movement appeared inside issue 134.

17
f
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27
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37
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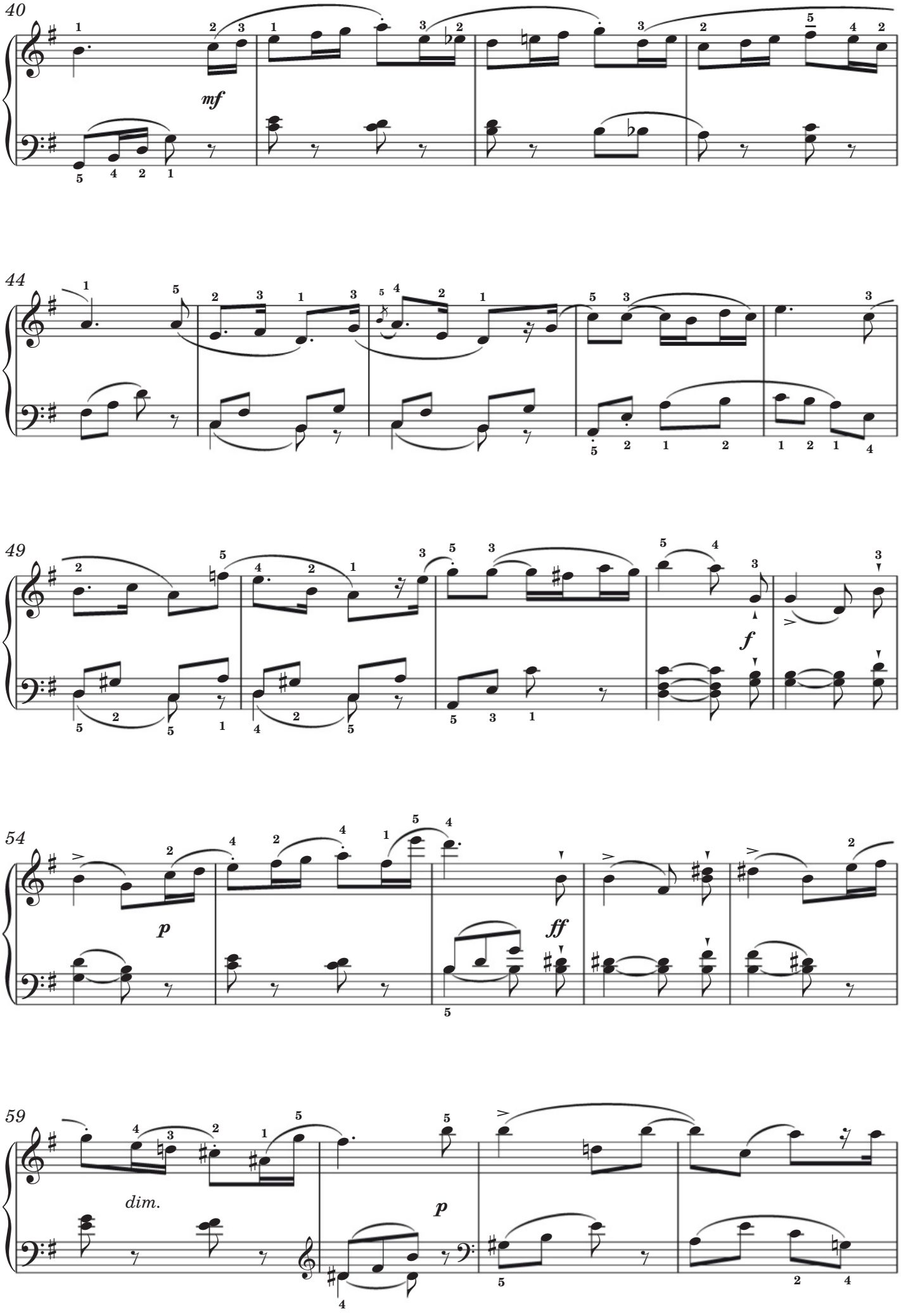
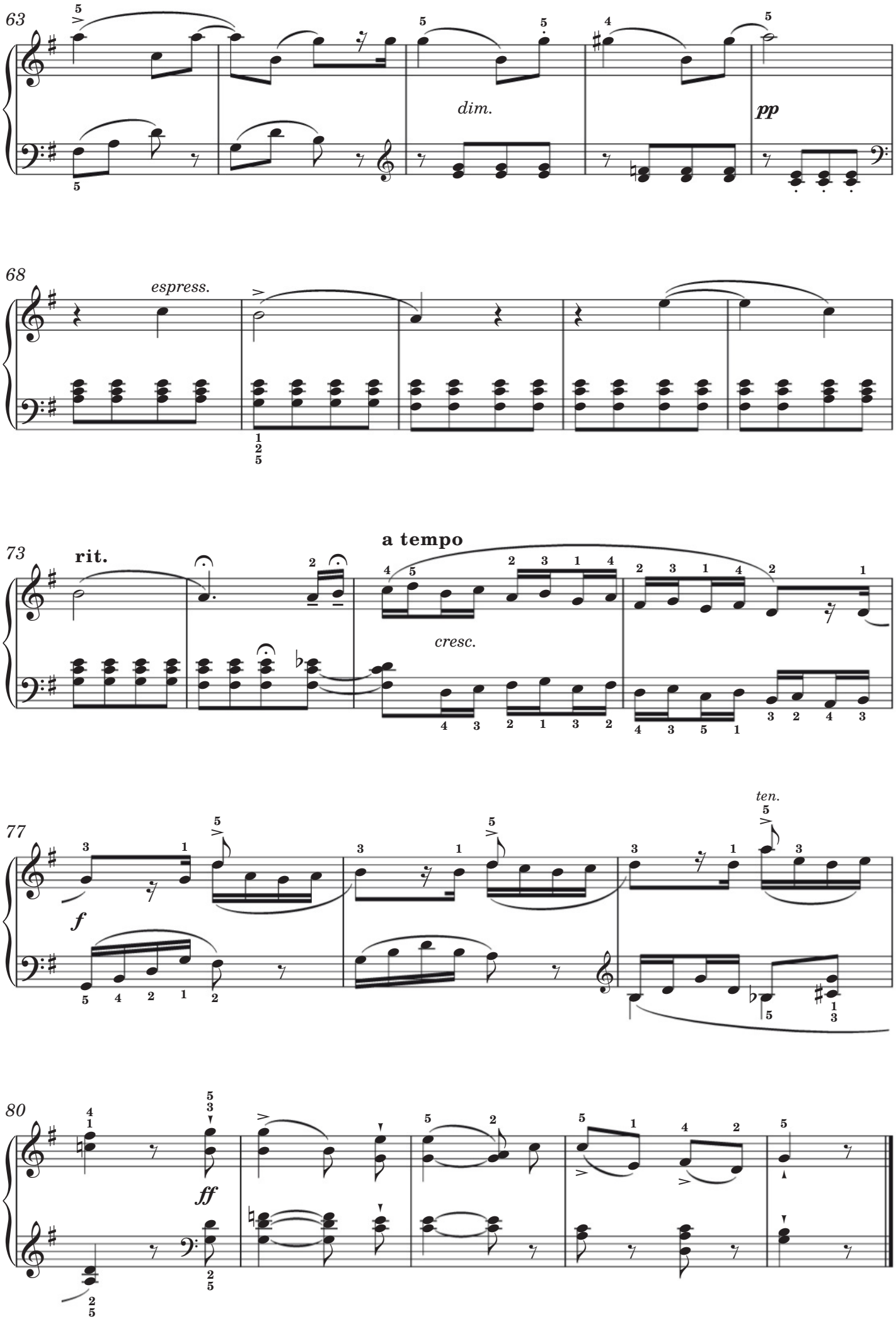
f

40
mf
44
49
f
54
p
ff
59
dim.
p

63
dim.
pp
68
espress.
73
rit.
a tempo
cresc.
77
ten.
f
80
ff

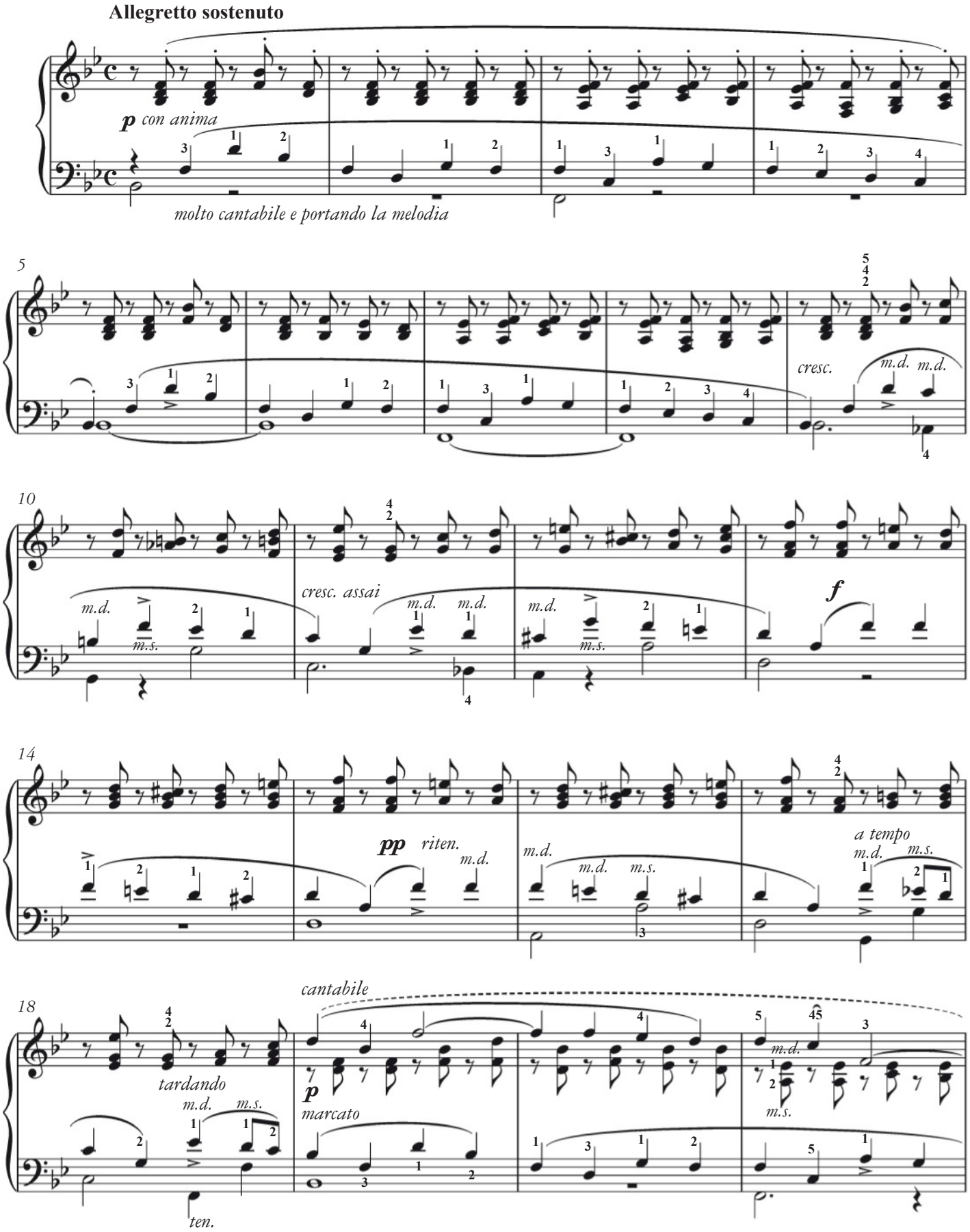
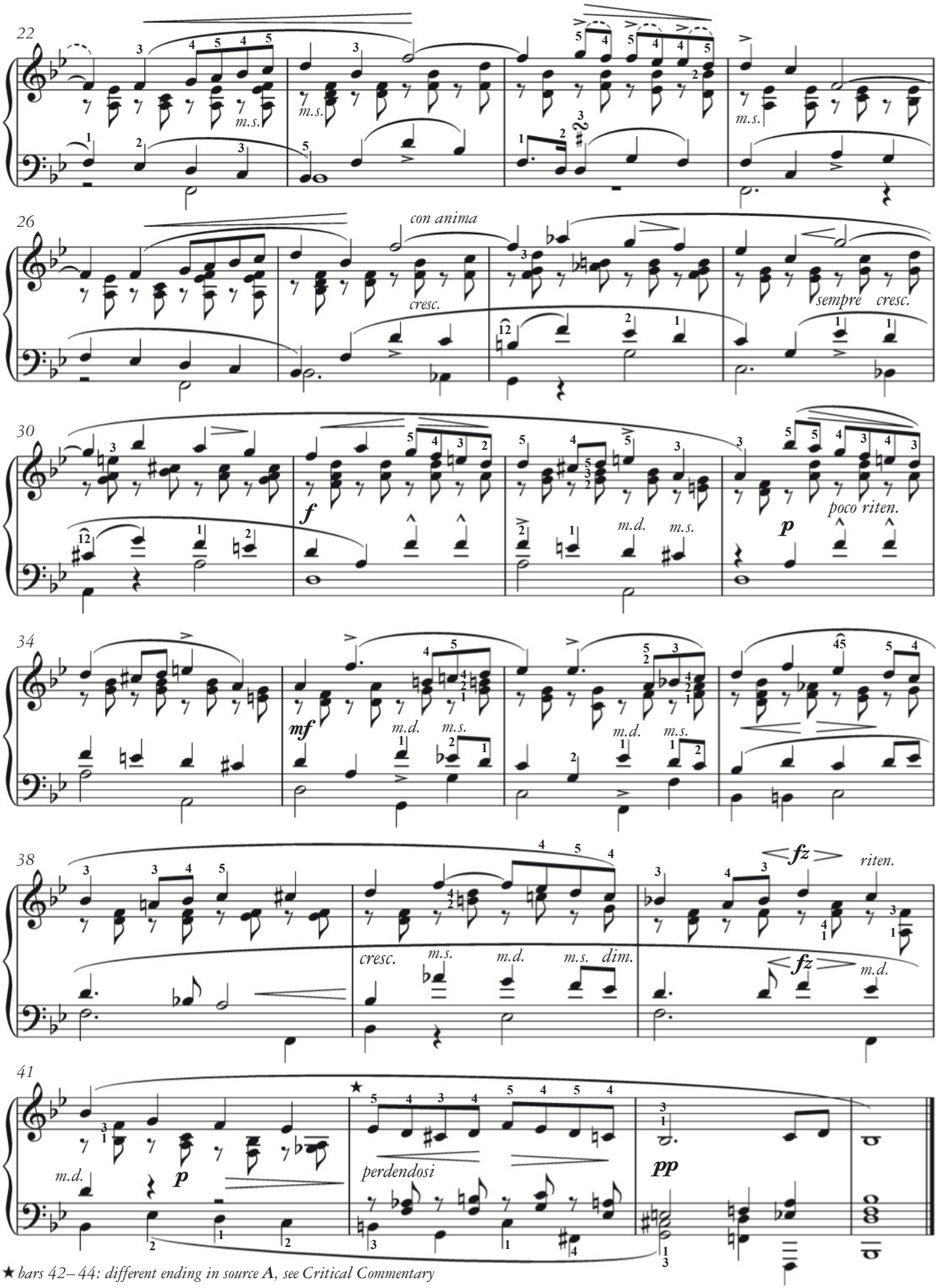
TRACK 7

DON'T MISS DANIEL GRIMWOOD'S LESSON ON THIS PIECE

Adolf von HENSELT (1814-1889)

Repos d'amour Op 2 No 4

INTERMEDIATE

A note about the track: Henselt wasn't the only composer to notate introductory improvisations at the start of compositions – and you will hear a brief improvisation here before the piece commences. So while Daniel Grimwood was preparing the Etudes for recording (*Repos d'amour* being one of them), the idea occurred to him to add a 'Préambule' to each piece. **Read Daniel Grimwood's in-depth lesson.**

© Faber Music

★ *bars 42–44: different ending in source* **A**, *see Critical Commentary*

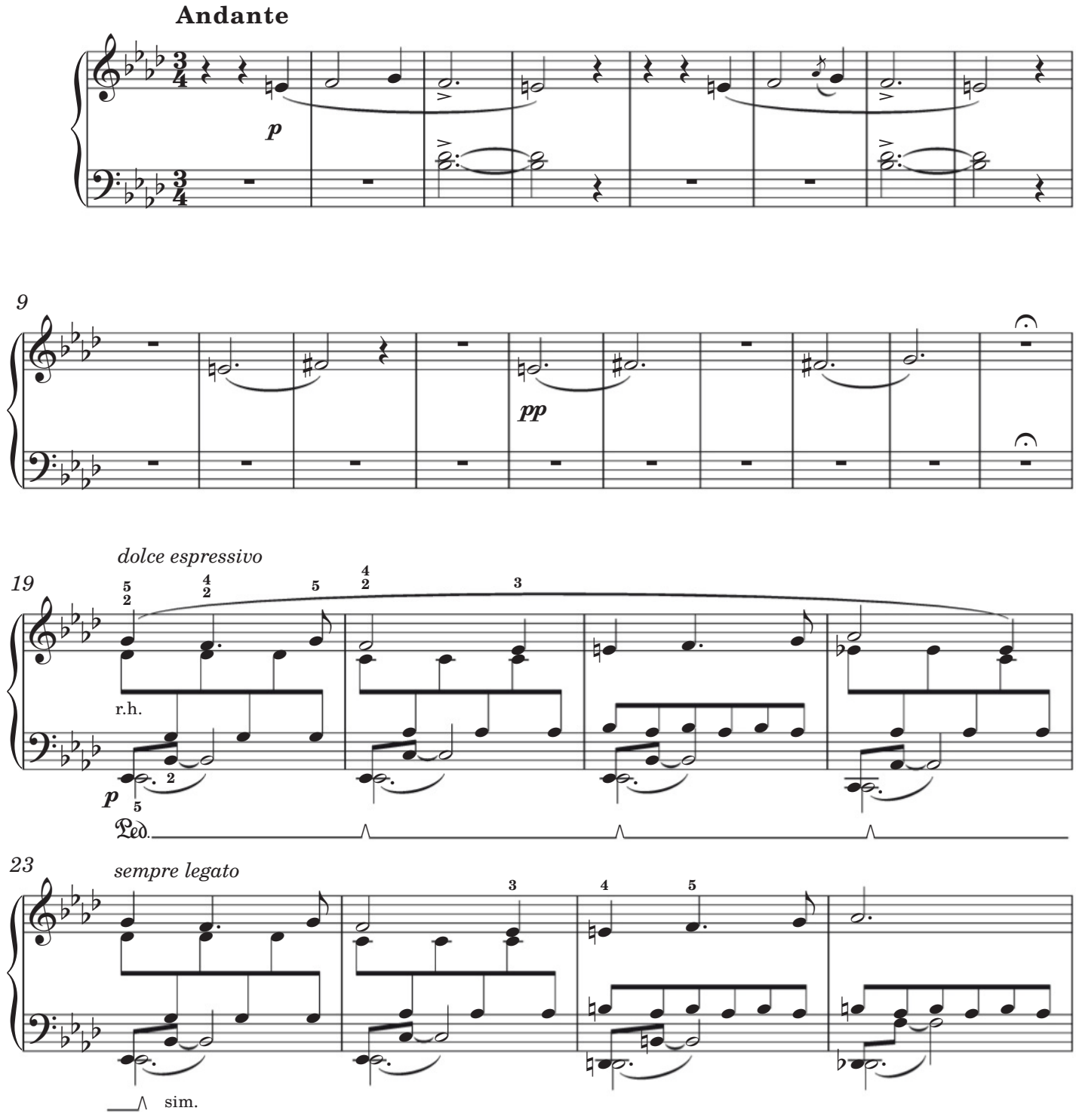
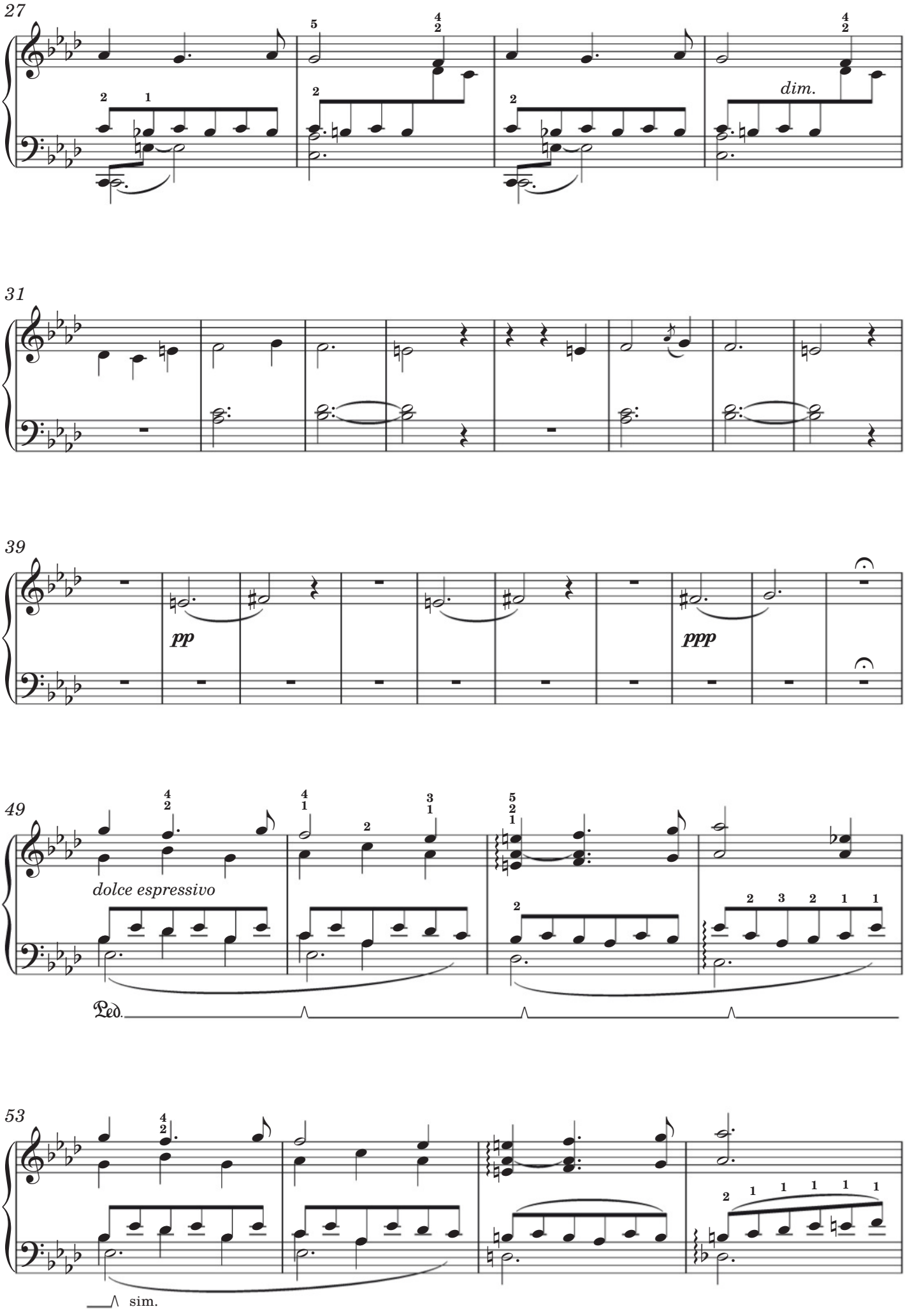
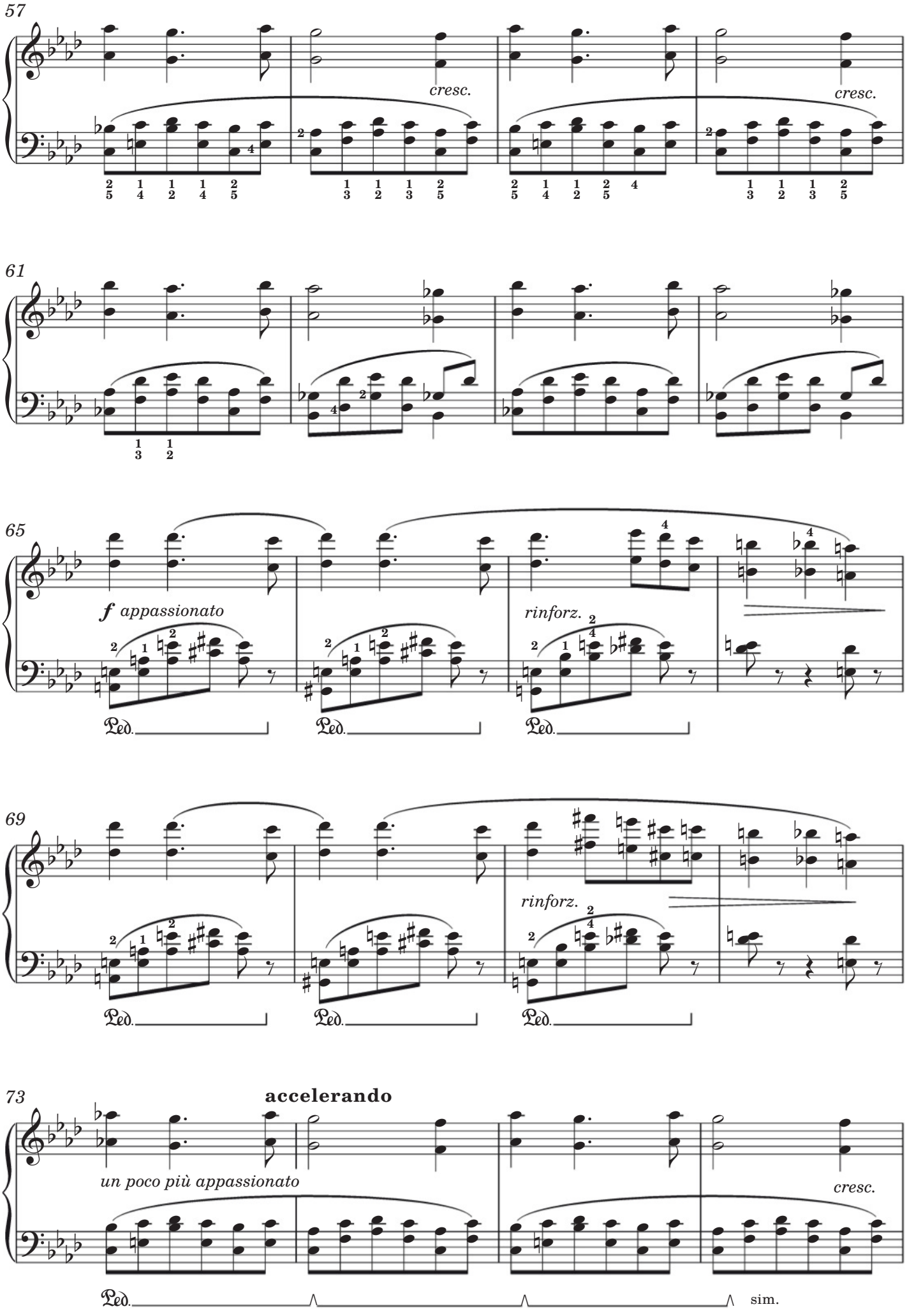
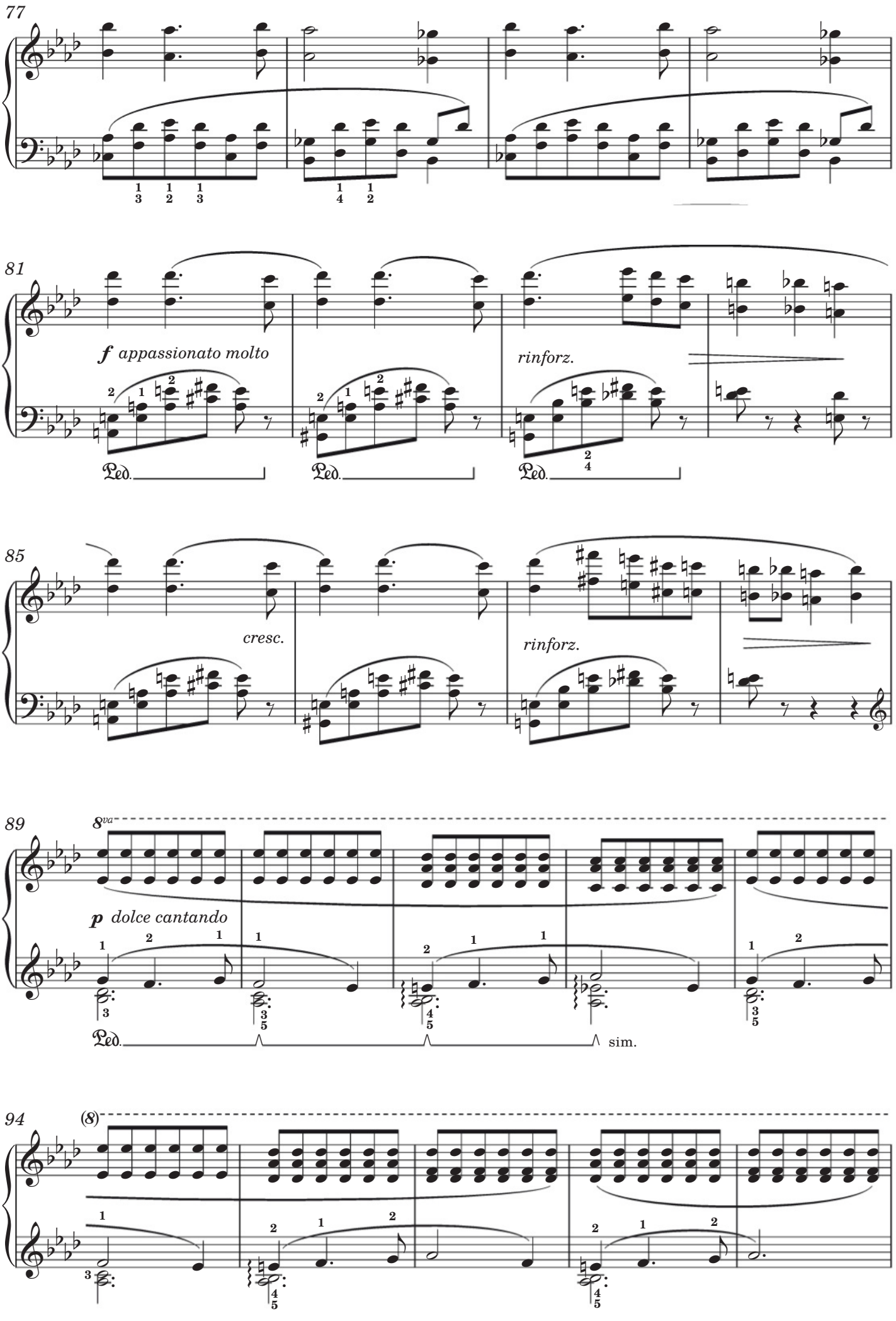
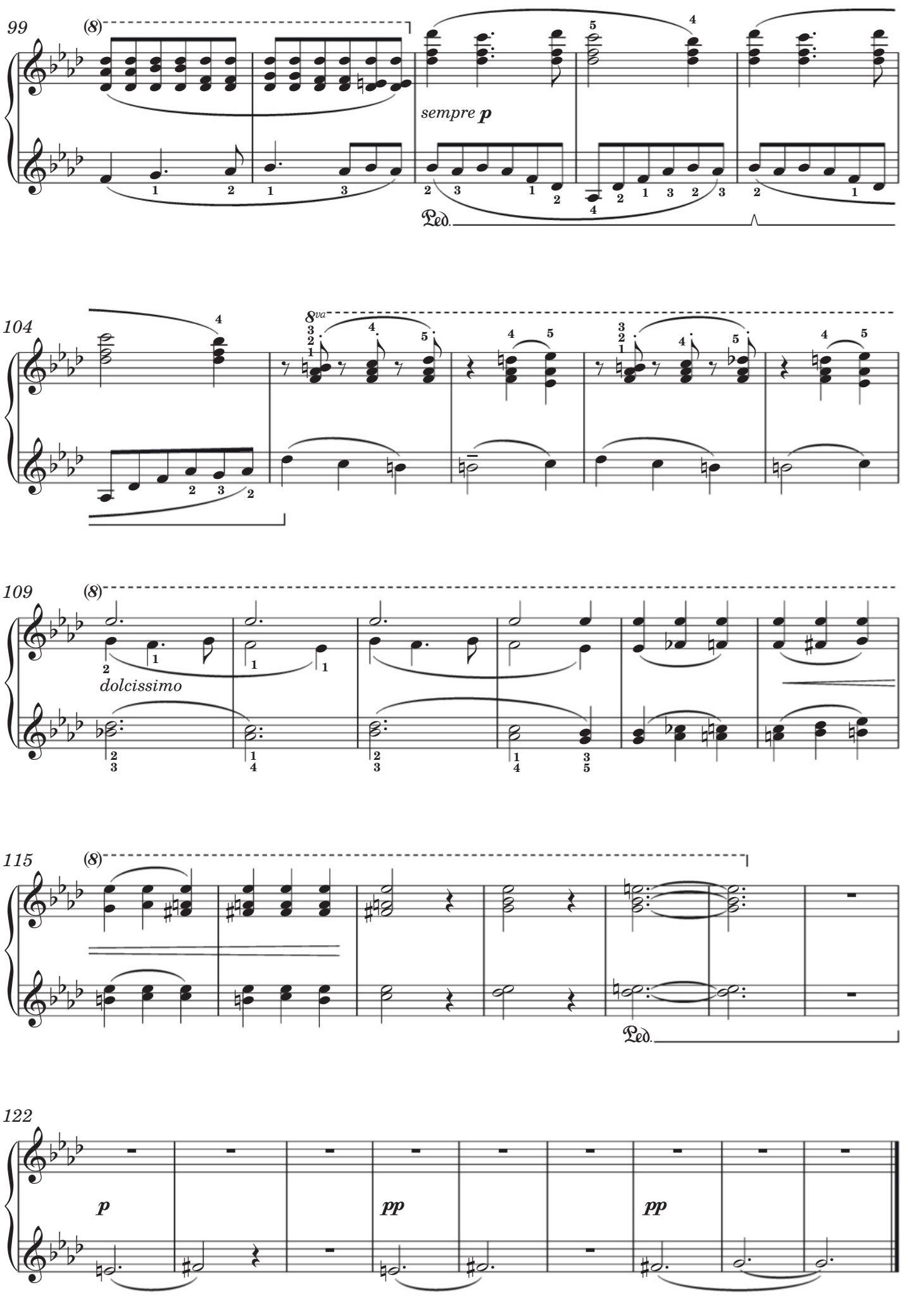
TRACK 8

Franz LISZT (1811-1886)
Formerly, No 10 from *Christmas Tree* Suite S186

INTERMEDIATE

Liszt's *Christmas Tree* Suite (*Weihnachtsbaum* in German and *Arbre de Noël* in French) is a set of 12 pieces composed between 1873-76, with revisions in 1881. The Suite exists in versions for solo piano and piano four-hands. *Christmas Tree* does not demand great virtuosity, having often been described as a distant relation of Schumann's *Kinderszenen* and Debussy's *Children's Corner.* It occupies an unusual place in Liszt's output, and it may be for these reasons that it has received relatively little attention from performers. That said, its beauty is apparent, and we have published some of the movements in past issues.

Playing tips: Formerly (in German, Ehemals) is the tenth piece from the set and because of its name requires a sense of longing and reflection, thus evoking a sense of 'long ago', and 'times past'. The piece starts out bare, building up gradually over five pages. The static quality of the first 18 bars calls for a good pulse and understanding of the phrasing, in order for the listener to understand the musical line. From bar 19, sink into the upper melody notes, producing a rich, singing tone. These melody notes are often played by the 'weaker' fingers, so they will need practice. At bar 49, the music becomes more impassioned – the melody now appearing an octave higher and the LH being of a thicker texture. Formerly ends as quietly and as lonely as it began. (It is exquisite, so do give it a try.)

Pedal tips: Pedal markings are there as a rough guide only. Use your ears and try to maintain a smooth, but clear, legato.


27
dim.
31
39
pp
ppp
49
dolce espressivo
Ped.
53
sim.

57
cresc.
cresc.
61
65
f appassionato
rinforz.
Ped.
69
rinforz.
Ped.
73
accelerando
un poco più appassionato
cresc.
Ped.
sim.

77
81
f appassionato molto
rinforz.
Ped.
85
cresc.
rinforz.
89
8va
p dolce cantando
Ped.
sim.
94
(8)

99
(8)
sempre p
Ped.
104
8va
109
(8)
dolcissimo
115
(8)
Ped.
122
p
pp
pp

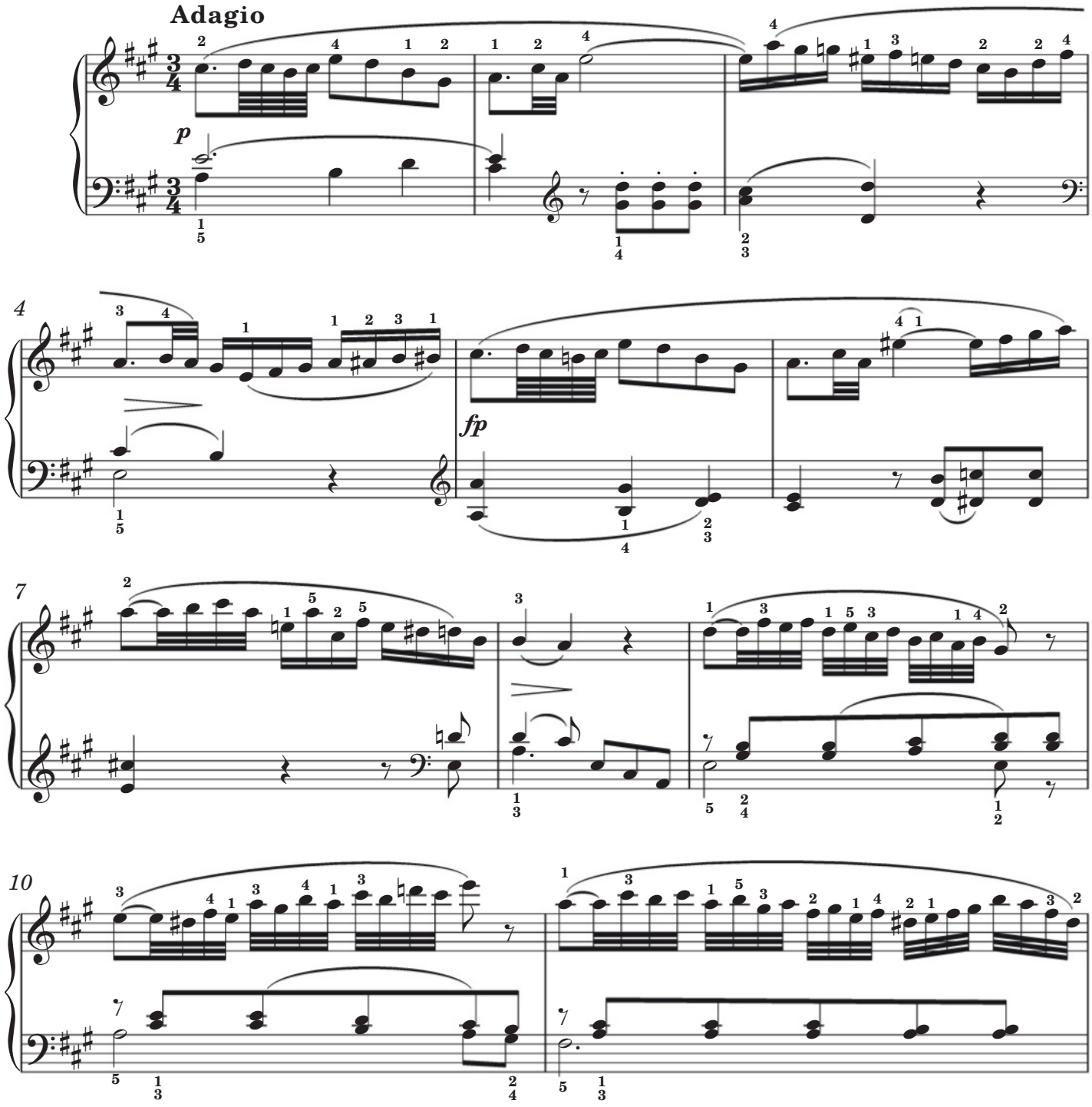
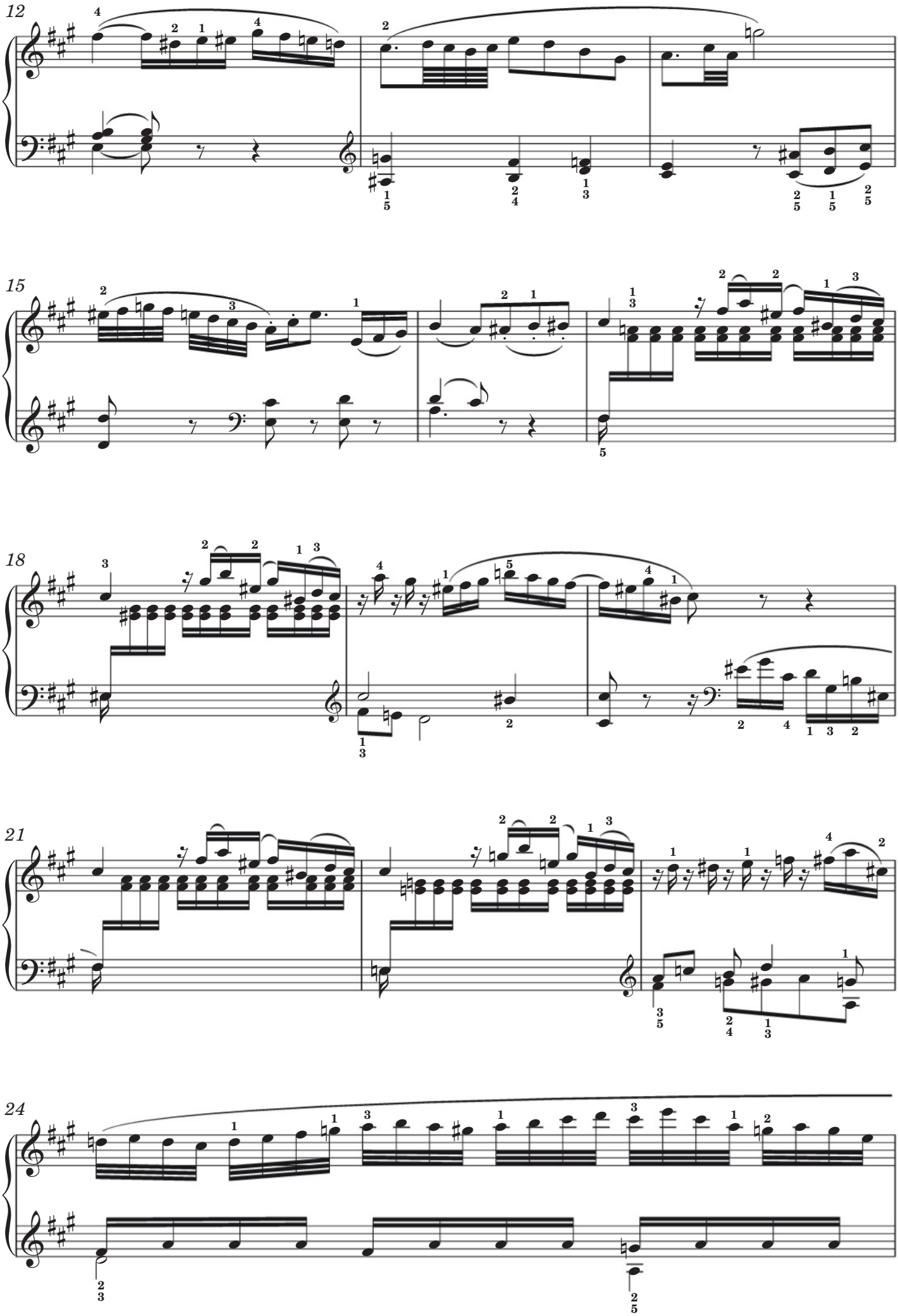
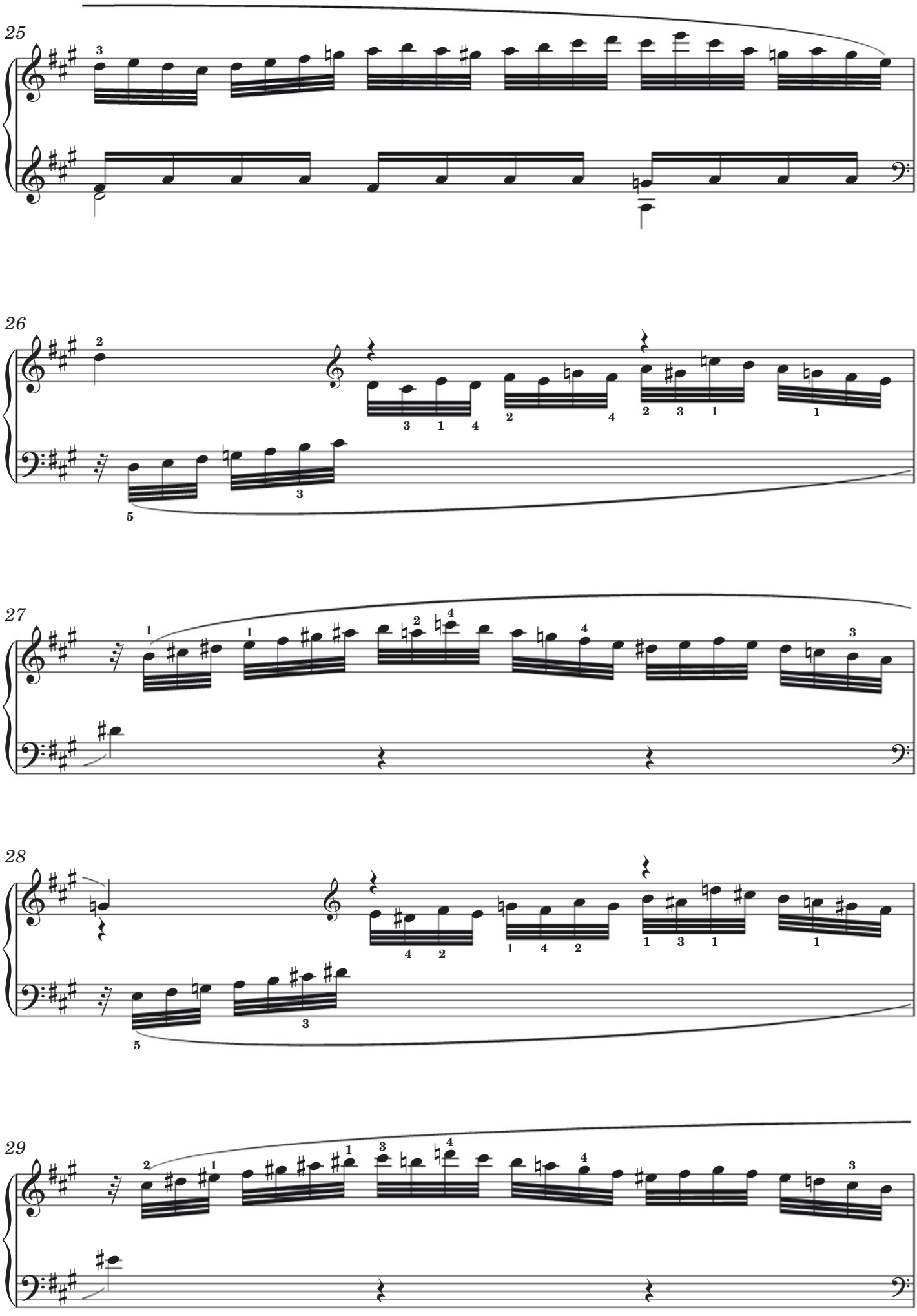
TRACK 9

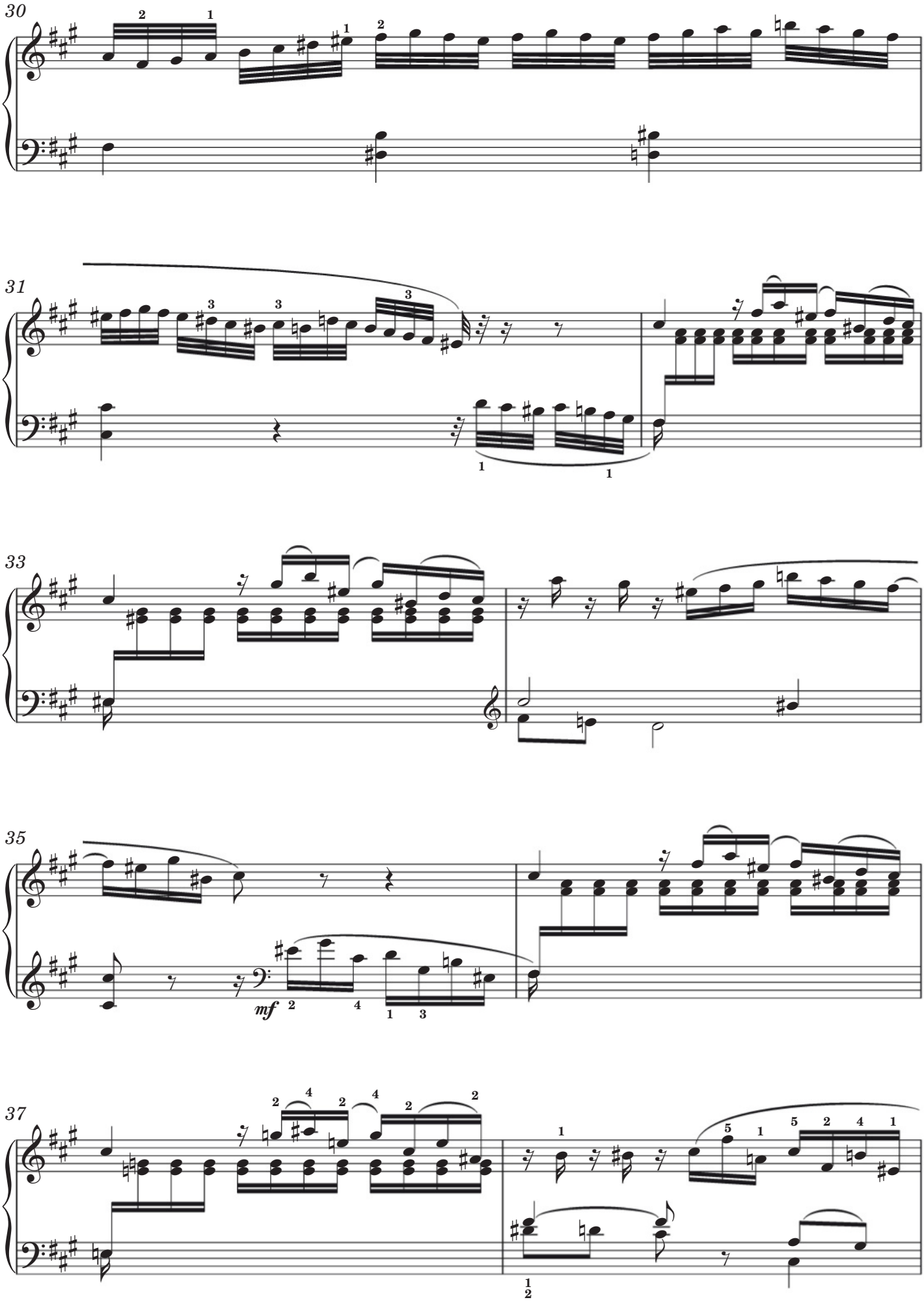
Wolfgang Amadeus MOZART (1756-1791)

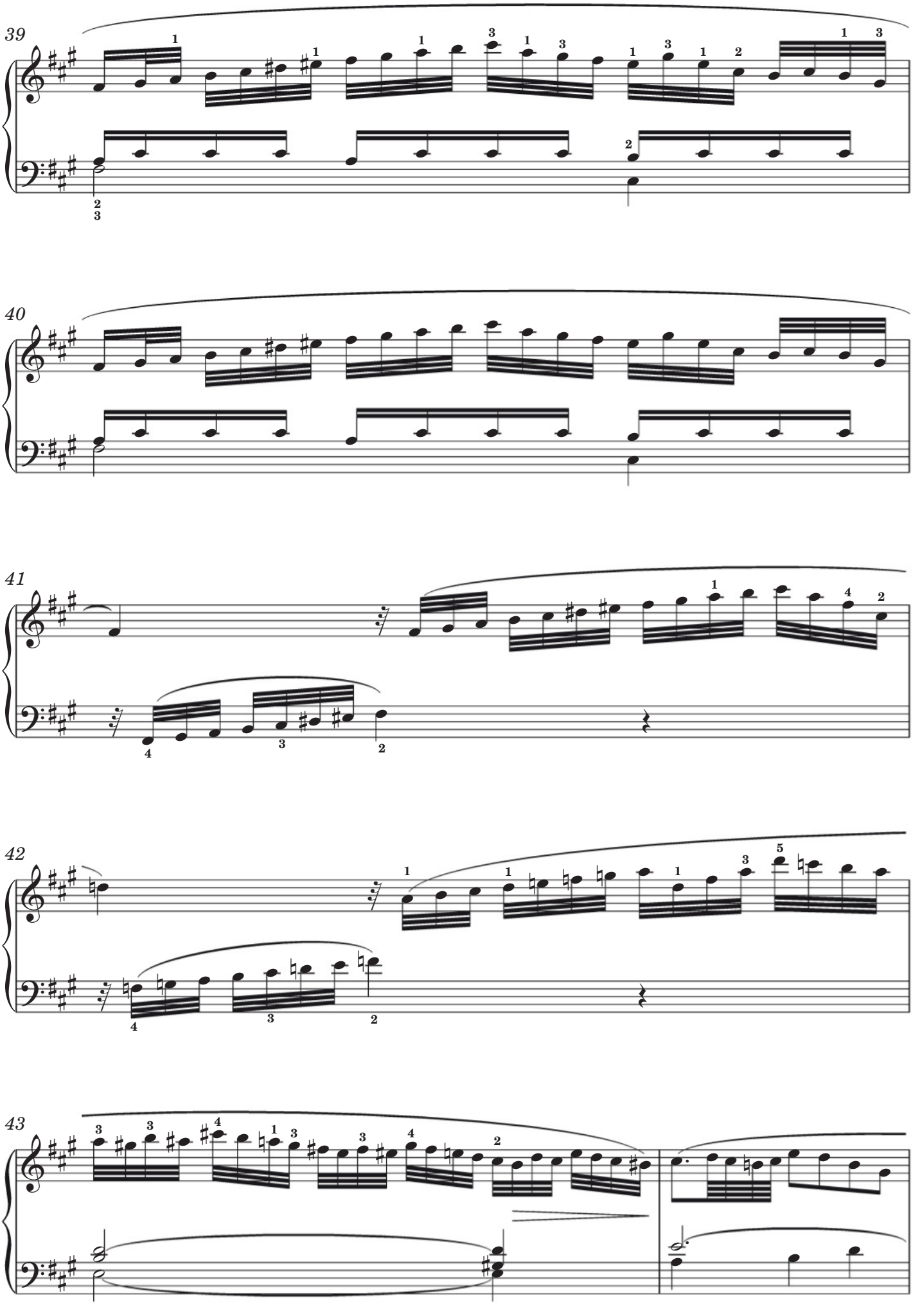
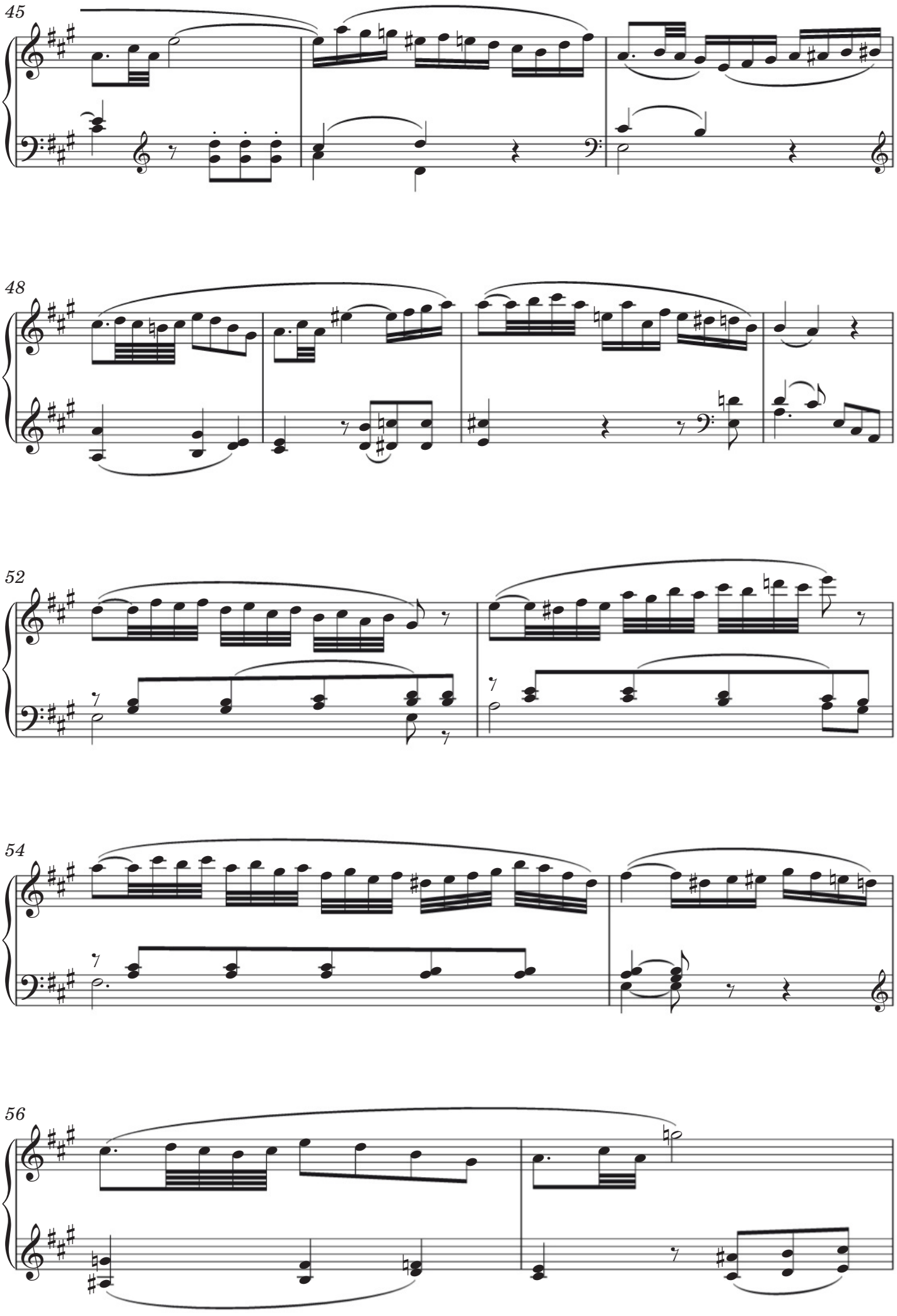
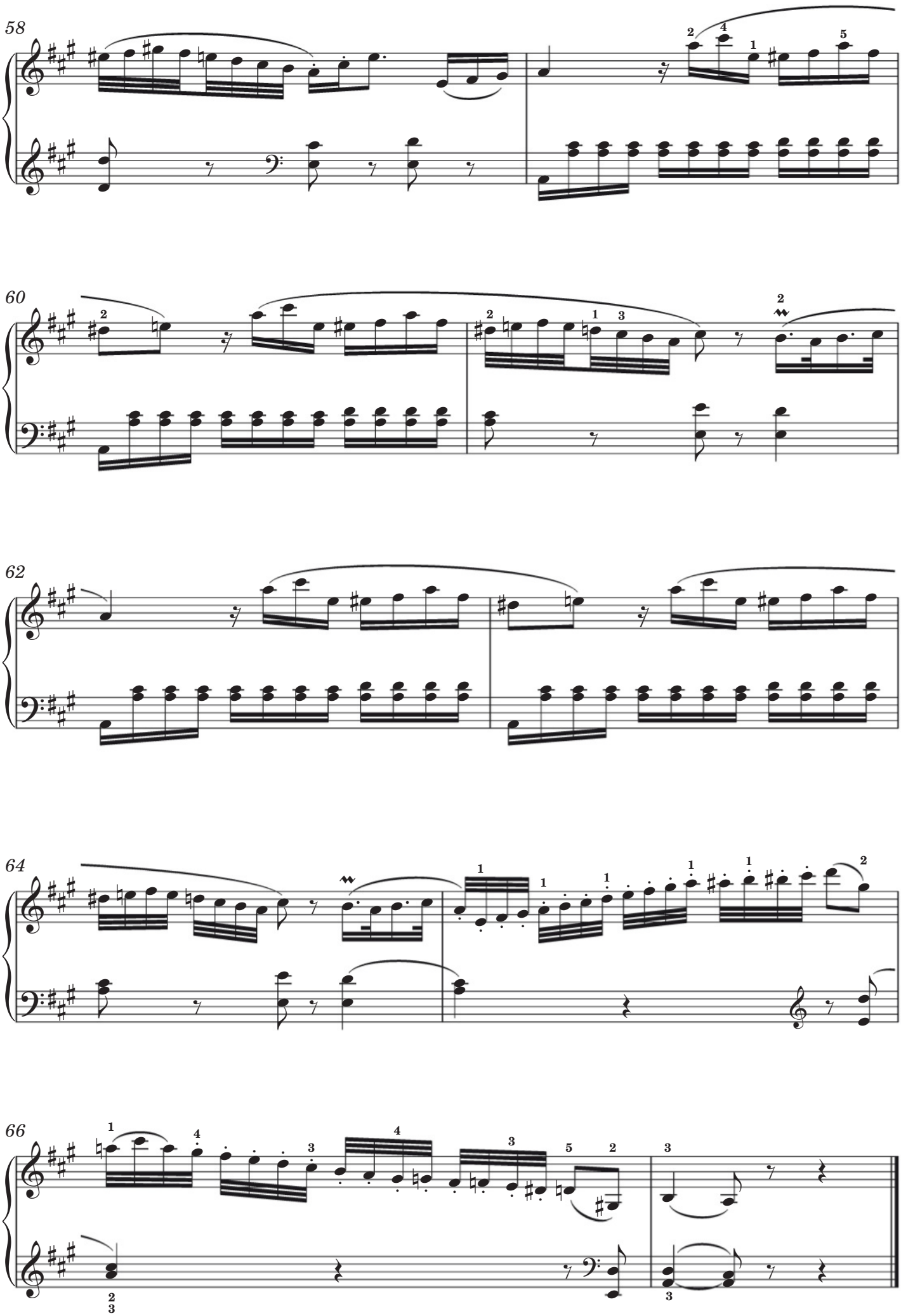
Sonata in D K576, slow movement

INTERMEDIATE

Mozart's Piano Sonata No 18 in D major K576 was composed as part of a set of six sonatas for Princess Frederica Charlotte of Prussia in 1789. It is often nicknamed 'The Hunt' or 'The Trumpet Sonata', for the hornlike opening. It was the only one of the intended set of six, published posthumously in 1805, and is Mozart's last sonata. The slow middle movement is in the dominant key of A major and includes many scale passages as well as counterpoint. Mozart uses harmonic exploration throughout the sonata such as suspensions and dissonances and there are some chromatic elements in this movement, as is common in many of Mozart's later works. Diminished chords are used to help modulate frequently and a series of keys are cadenced into.

Playing tips: As is the case with Mozart, there is so much to absorb in just one bar. We suggest practising in small sections (and *not* from the beginning), hands separately, in order to catch everything that needs to be perfectly refined (the different types of articulation, phrasing, dynamics, melody versus accompaniment etc). On the subject of dynamics, you will see that there are few markings, leaving the player open to experimentation. Ditto re the pedalling, where markings have been ommitted altogether. Subtle pedalling will be needed, so use your ears and try to work out what sounds right.

12
15
18
21
24

25
26
27
28
29


30
31
33
35
mf
37

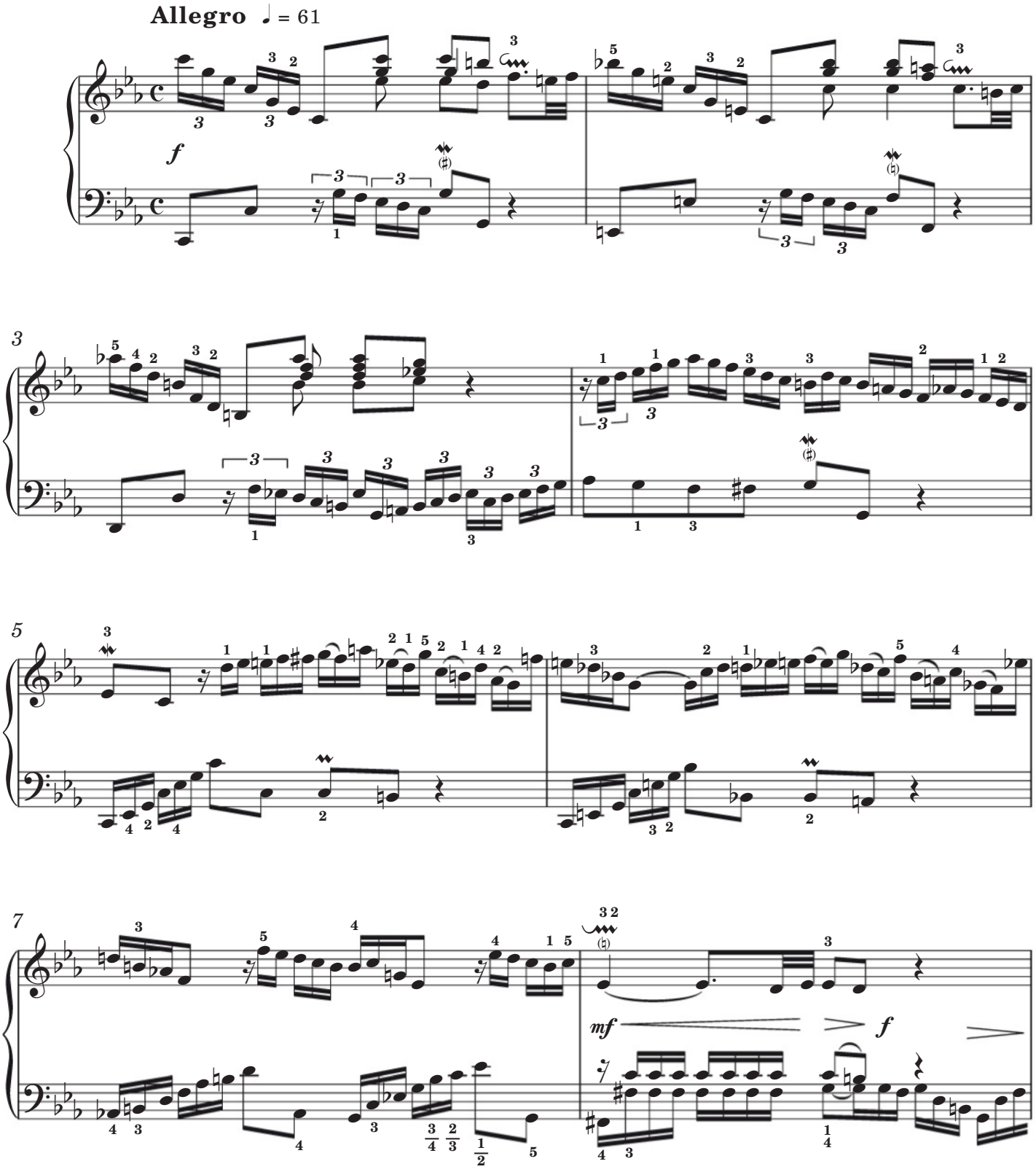
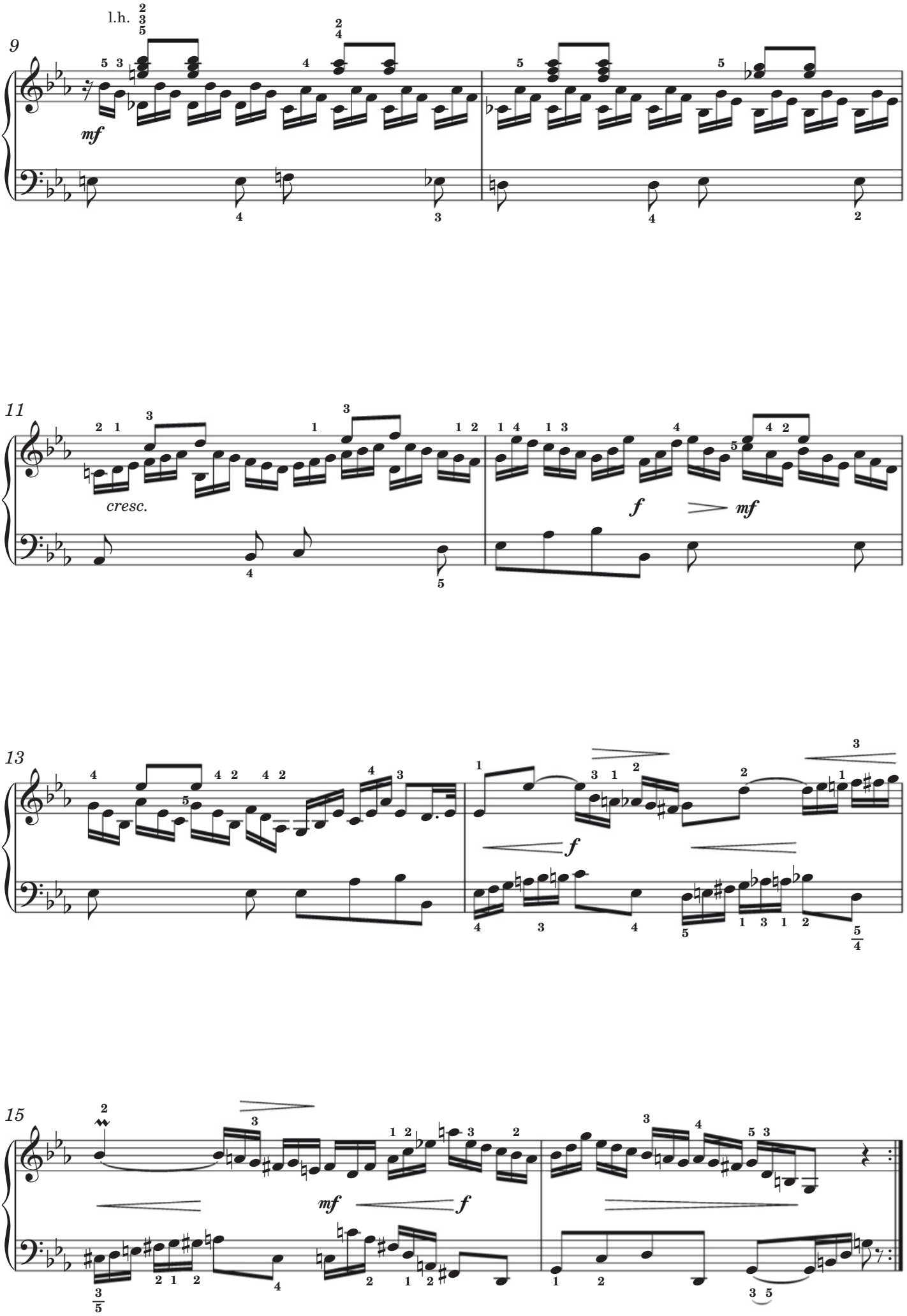
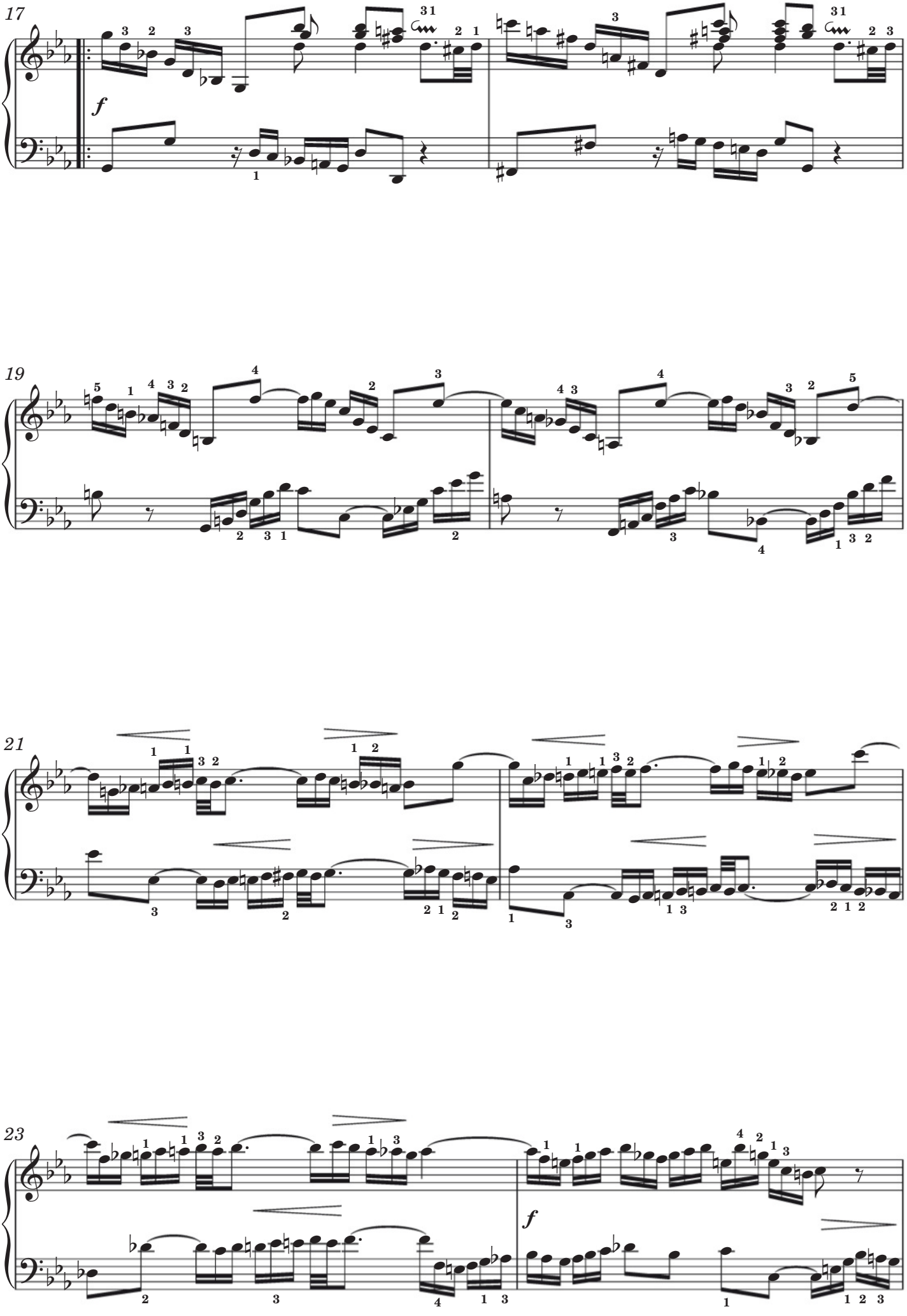
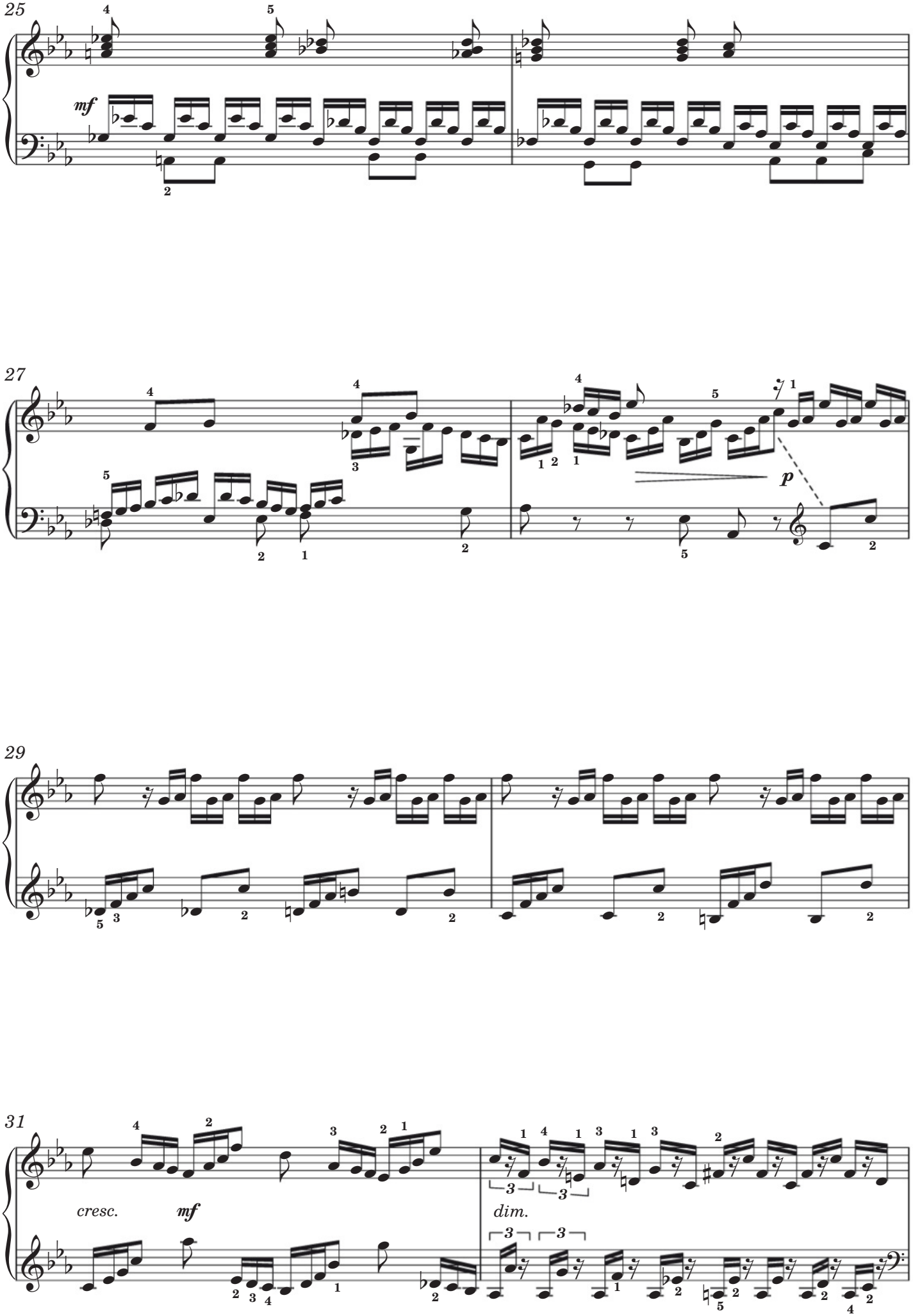
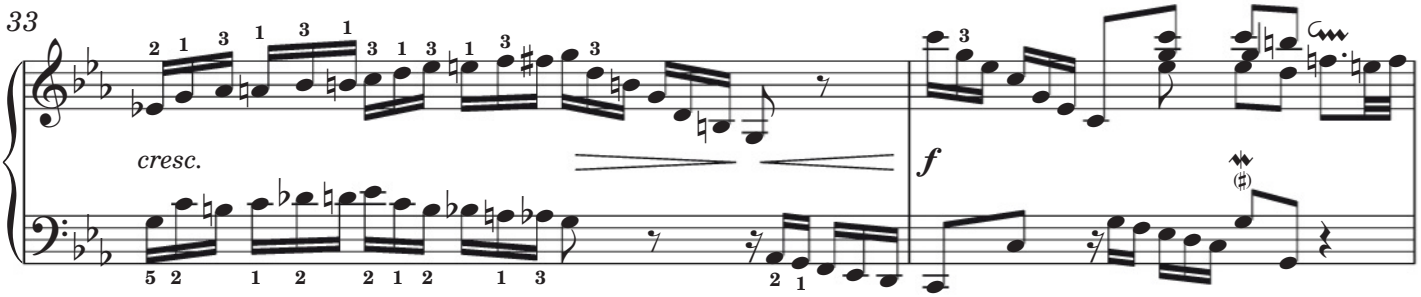
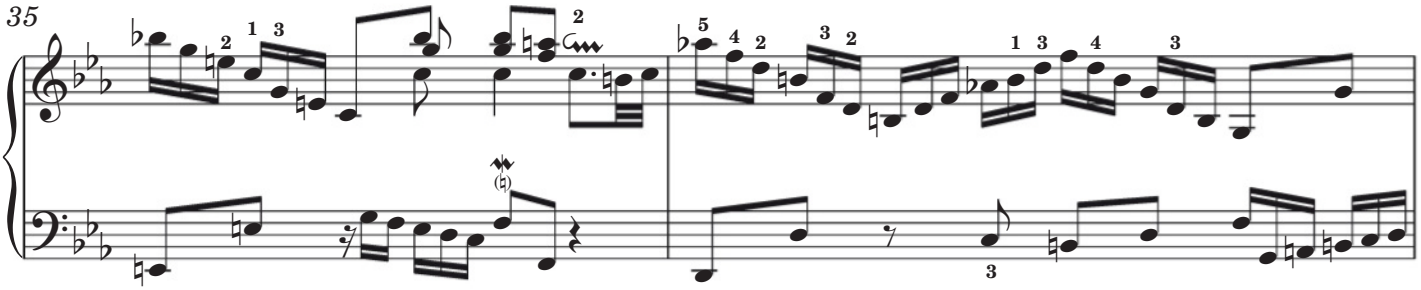

39
40
41
42
43

45
48
52
54
56

58
60
62
64
66

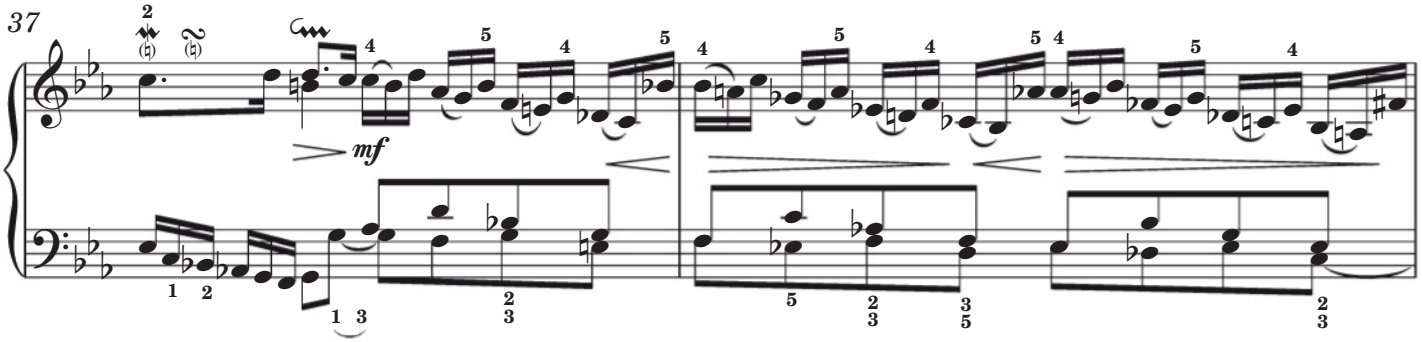
TRACK 10

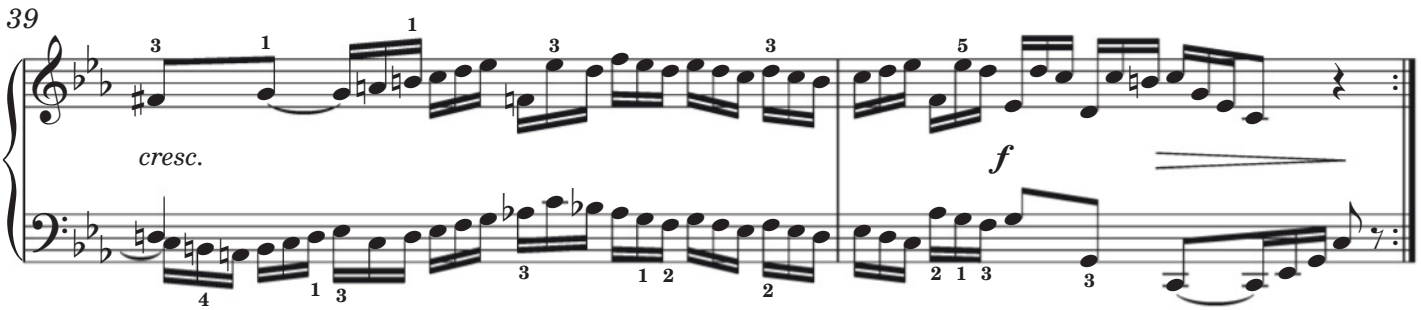
Johann Sebastian BACH (1685-1750)
Fantasia in C minor BWV 906

INTERMEDIATE/ ADVANCED

The Fantasia and Fugue in C minor BWV 906 was likely composed during Bach's tenure in Leipzig (1723-1750). The work survives in two autograph scores – one with the Fantasia alone, and the other, believed to have been penned around 1738 in which the Fugue is incomplete. The piece is notable for being one of Bach's latest compositions in the prelude and fugue format.

Playing tips: This fantasie-styled work cannot be viewed with super strict counting, as the ornaments at the end of each bar act as expressive outpourings as well as a transition into the next wave of descending arpeggios. Think about Bach's Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue in D minor, for example, where generous liberty needs to be given to the runs and the space in-between the runs, as long as the integrity of the overall pulse is present. This Fantasia may not be as 'free' as the Chromatic Fantasia but freedom of interpretation, especially in the 'statement-announcing' opening, is required. Practise slowly at first, and with the utmost clarity. With regards to pedal, just a few dabs here and there will suffice.

l.h.
9
mf
11
cresc.
f
mf
13
f
15
mf
f

17
f
19
21
23
f

25
mf
27
p
29
31
cresc.
mf
dim.

33
cresc.
f

35


37
mf


39
cresc.
f

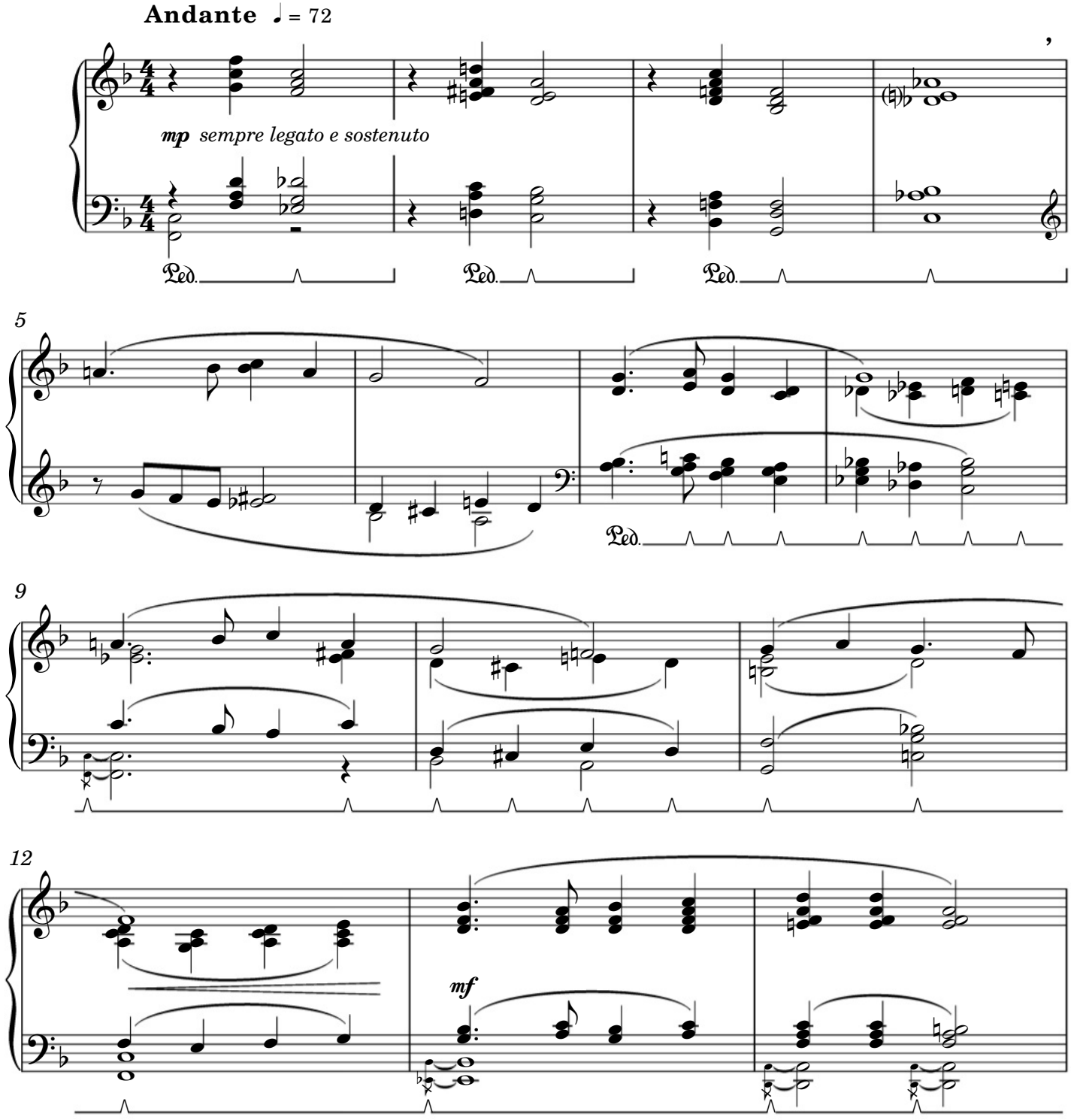
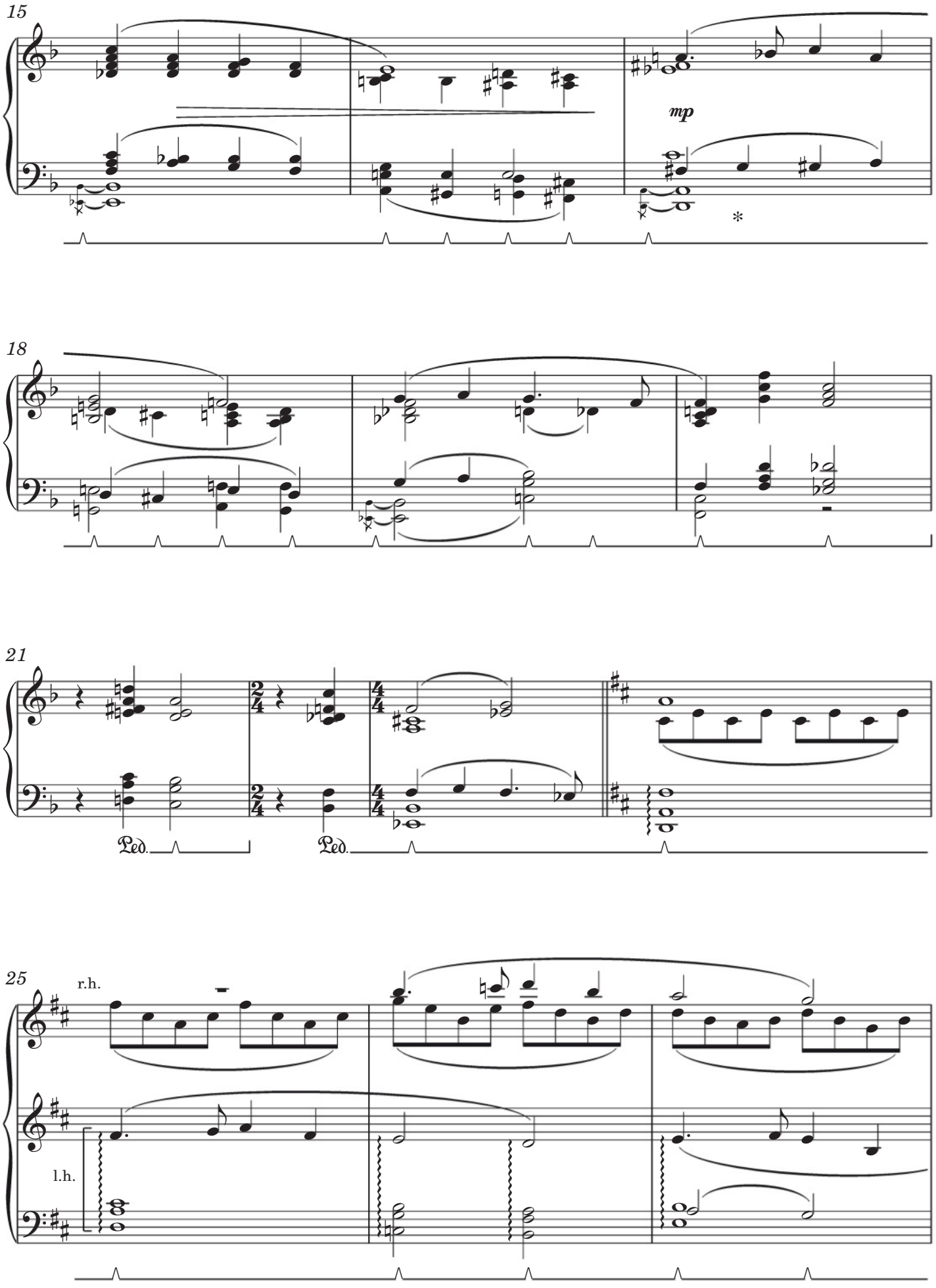
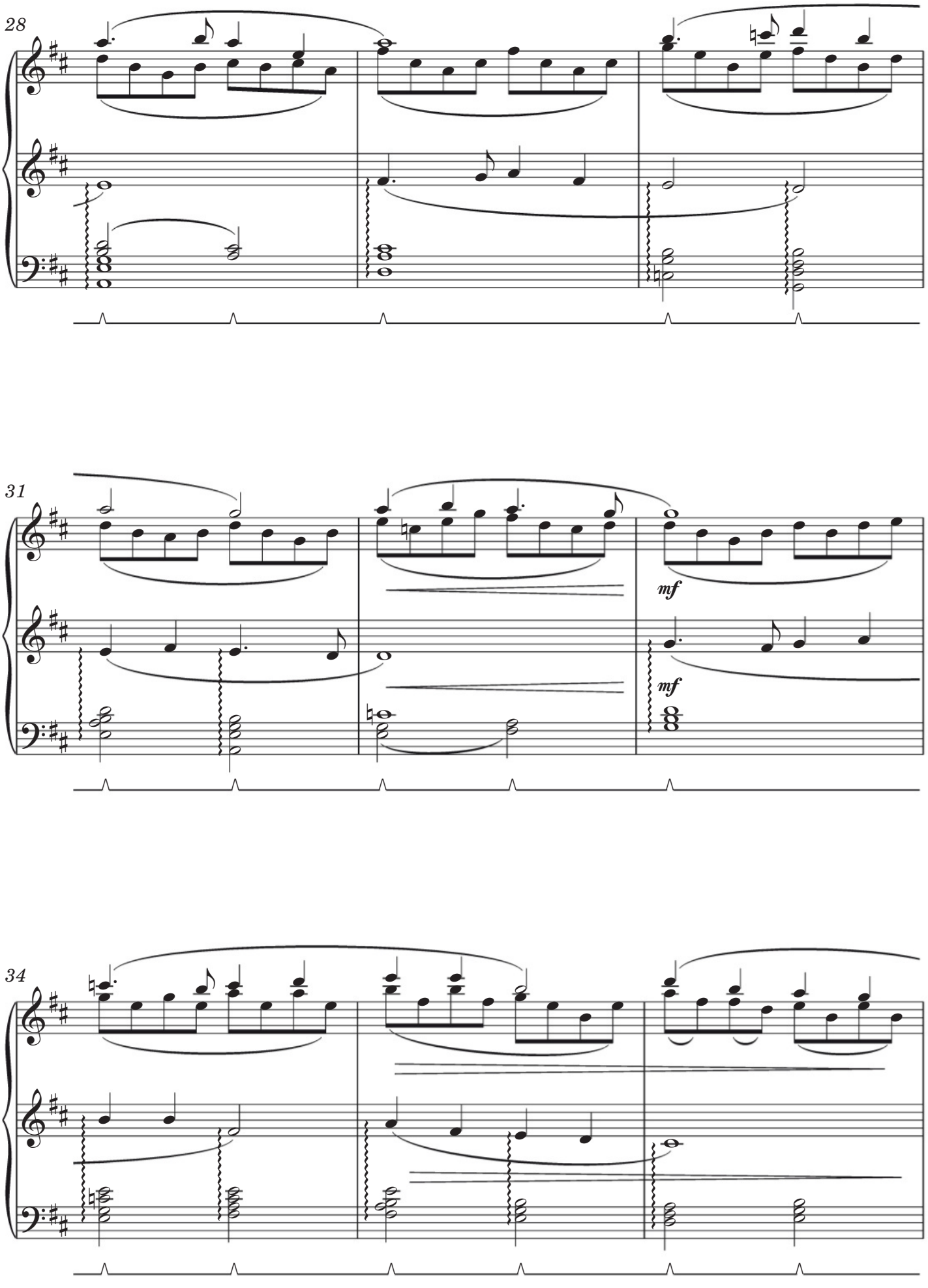
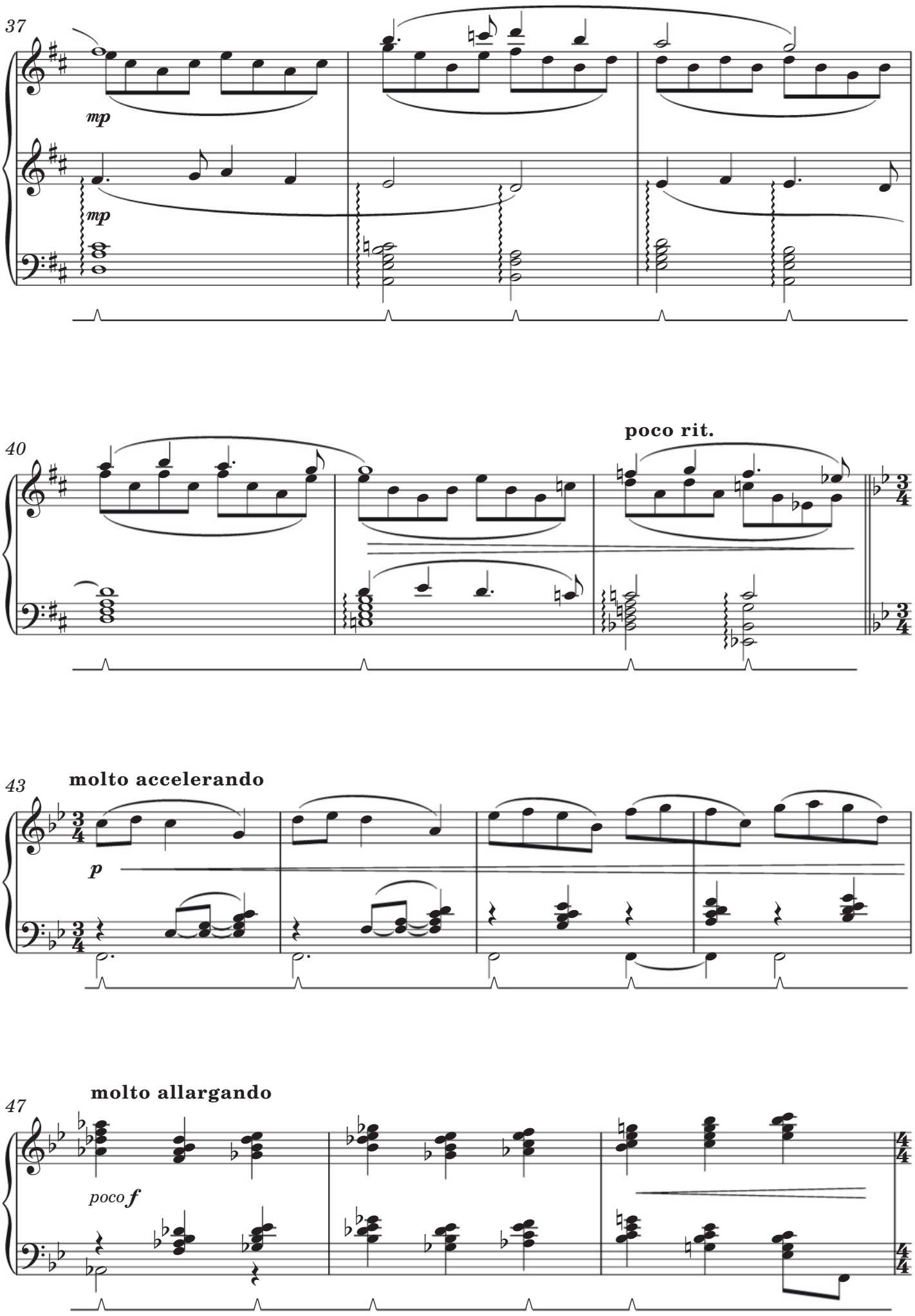
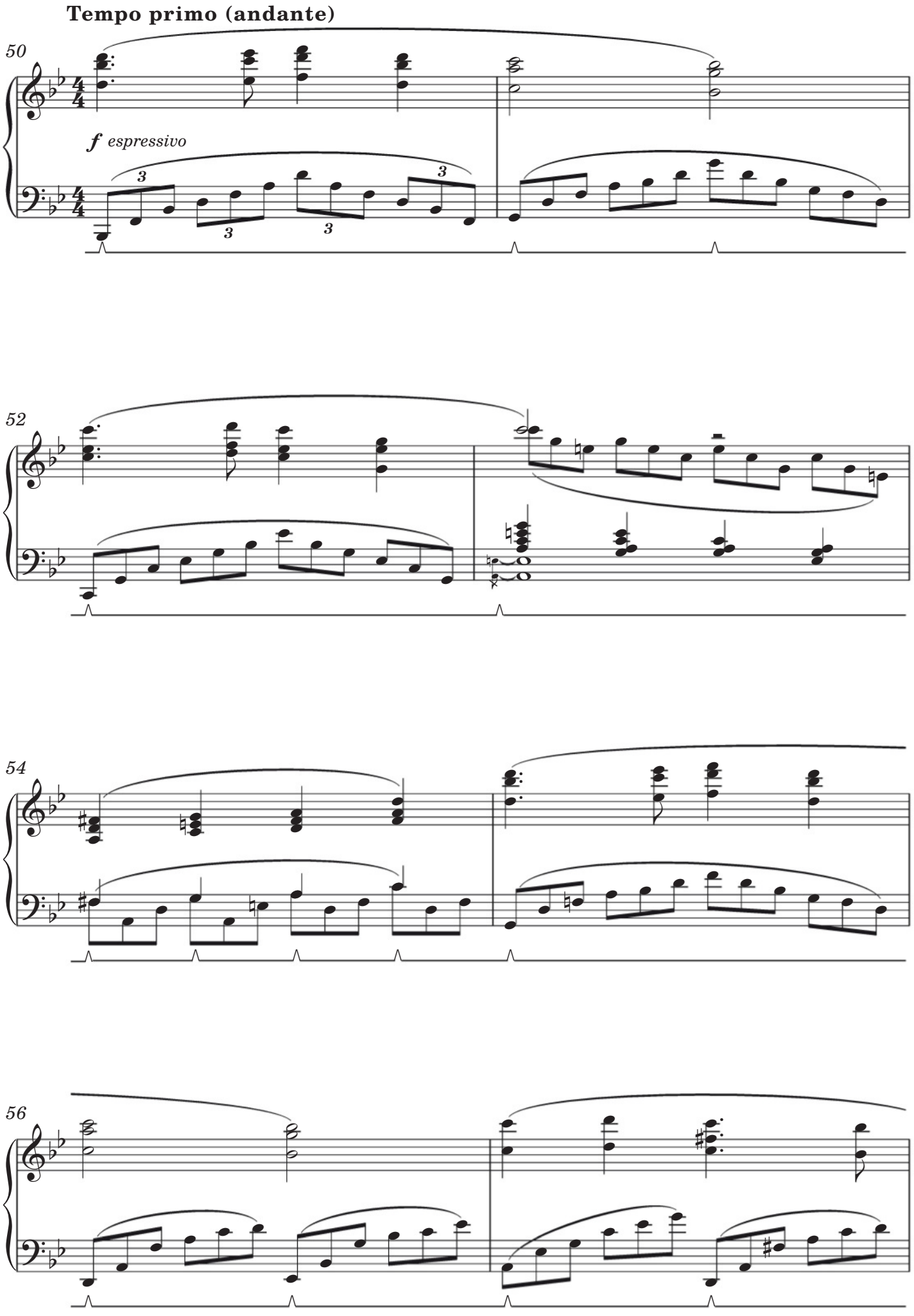
TRACK 11

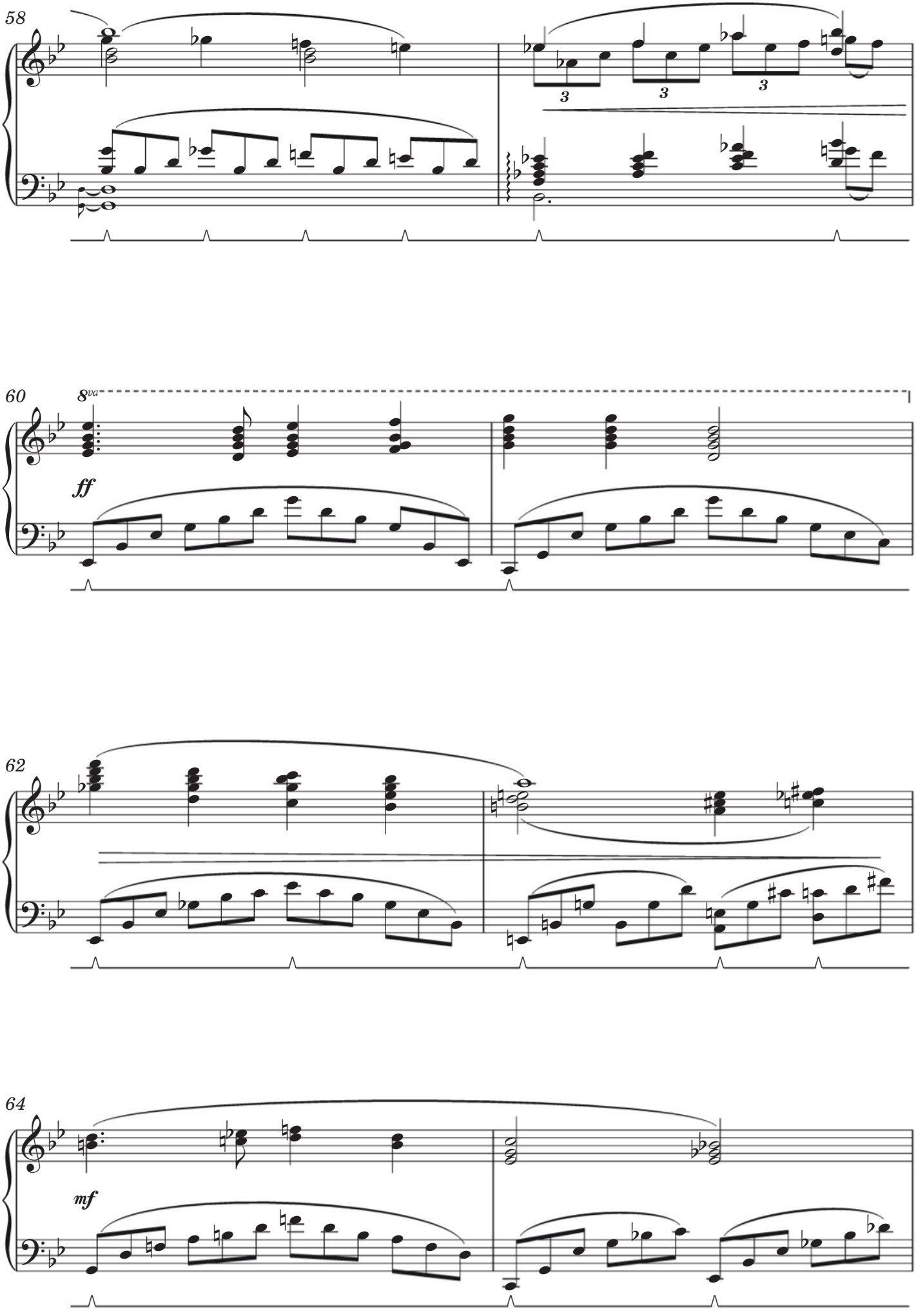
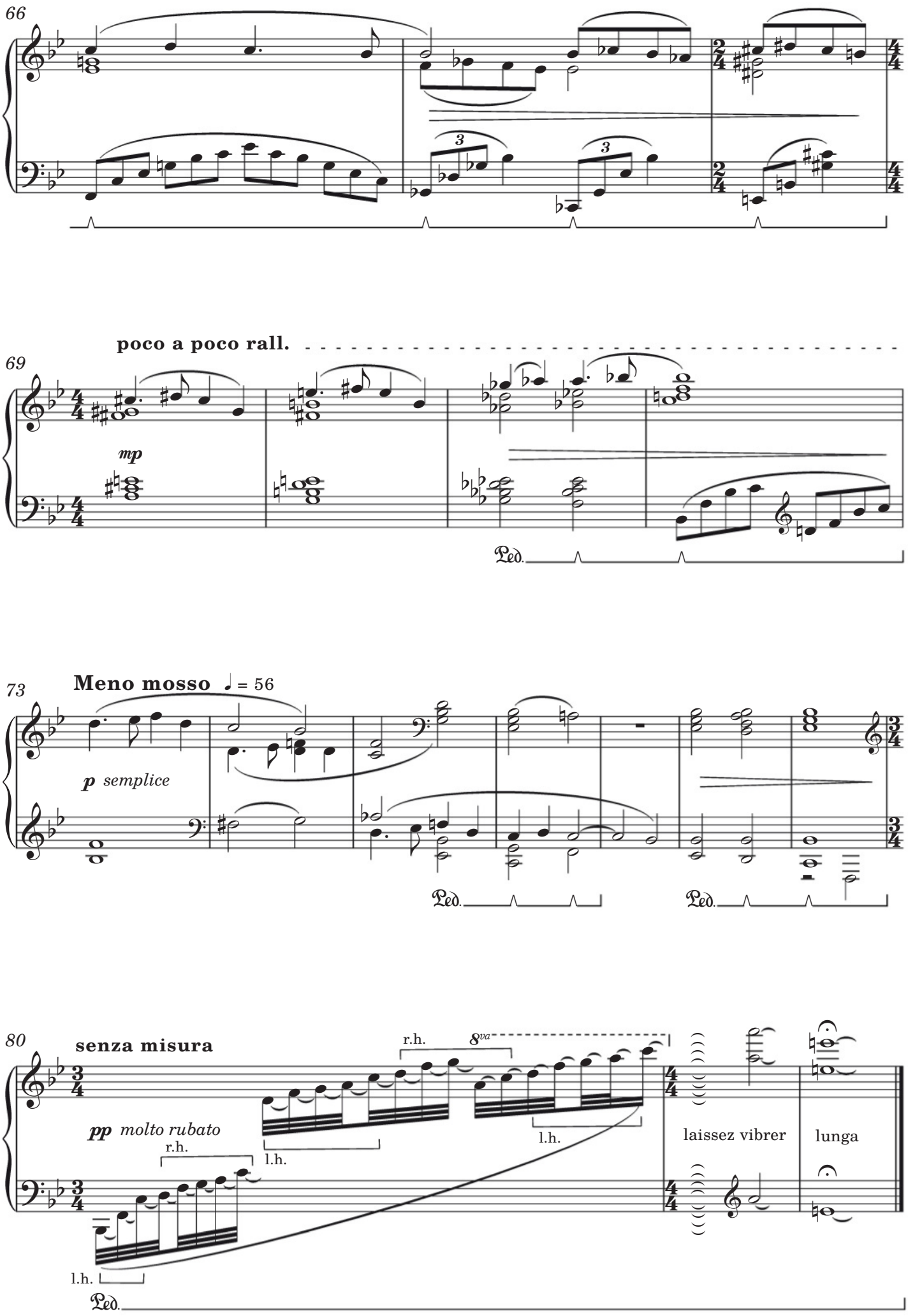
Gustav Holst (1874-1934) arr. Derry BERTENSHAW

In the Bleak Midwinter

INTERMEDIATE/ ADVANCED

CLICK HERE TO WATCH CHENYIN LI PLAY THIS PIECE

Playing tips from the composer/arranger: This is a contemporary romantic arrangement, with jazz-inspired harmonies, of a well-loved British carol, words by Christina Rossetti set to the tune 'Cranham' by Gustav Holst (1874-1934). Bars 25-41 are the trickiest: the carol melody is in canon in two keys! Aim to play the arpeggiated LH chords speedily and smoothly so as not to disturb the flow of the music. The passage is written on three staves to avoid unnecessary ledger lines. Bars 43-49, make the most of the molto accelerando and molto allargando so the melody makes a grand entrance at bar 50. Bar 80 to the end, play this as freely as you wish. *Pedal tips*: See markings throughout.

* "Half-pedalling"

28
31
mf
mf
34

37
mp
mp
40
poco rit.
43
molto accelerando
p
47
molto allargando
poco f

Tempo primo (andante)
50
f espressivo
52
54
56


58
60
8va
ff
62
64
mf

66
3
3
2/4
4/4
poco a poco rall.
69
mp
Ped.
73
Meno mosso ♩ = 56
p semplice
Ped.
Ped.
80
senza misura
r.h.
8va
pp molto rubato
r.h.
l.h.
l.h.
l.h.
laissez vibrer
lunga
Ped.

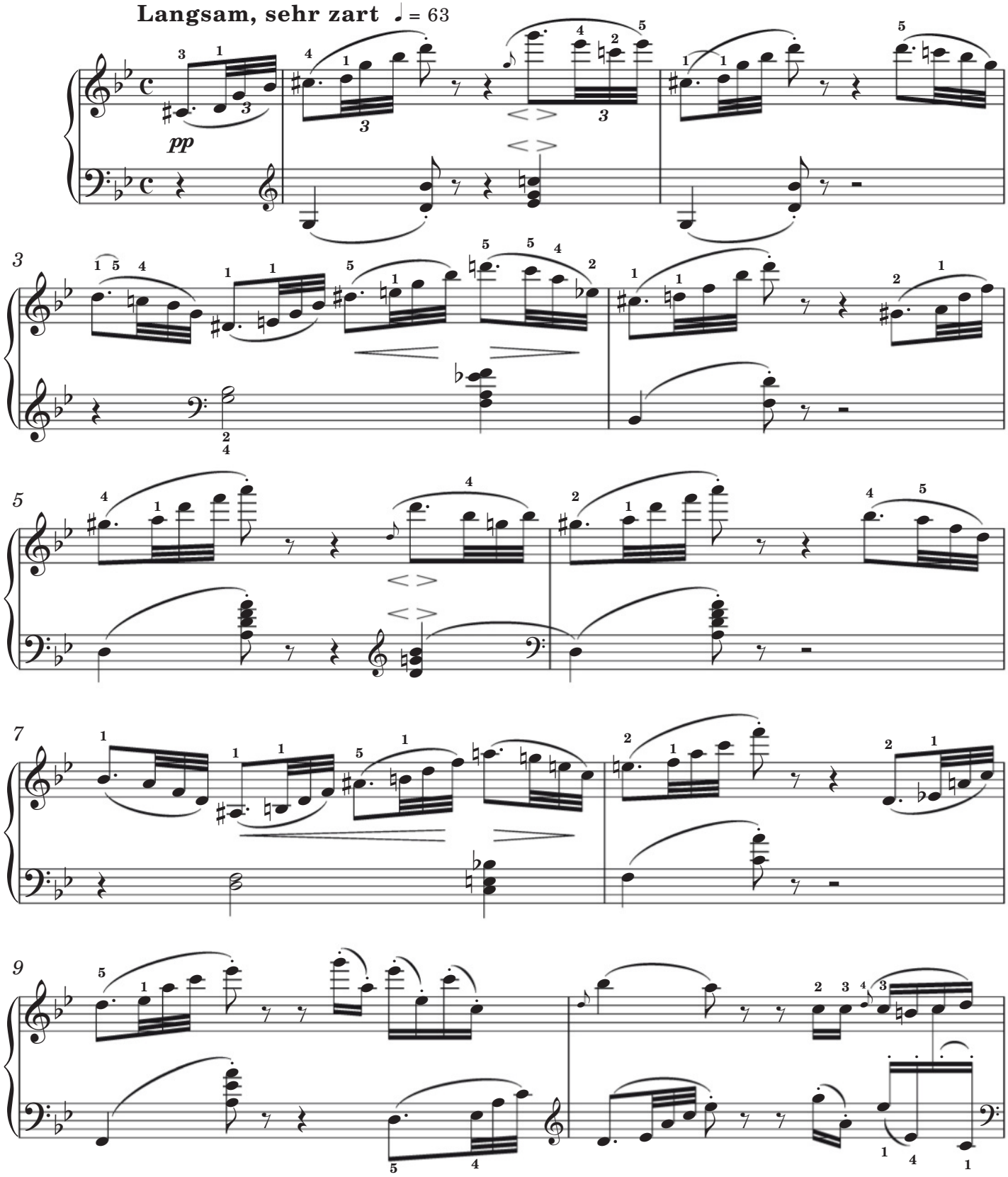
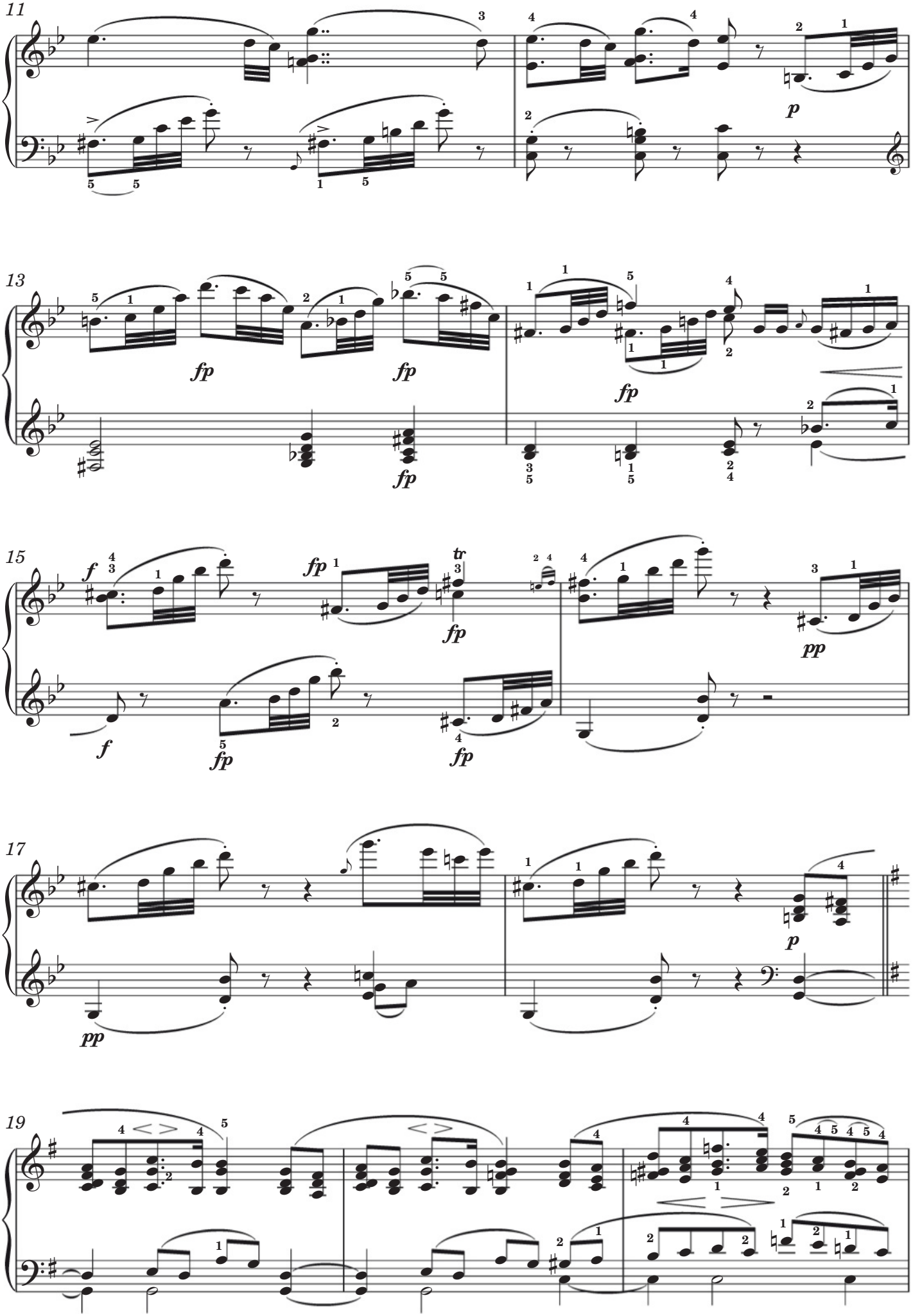
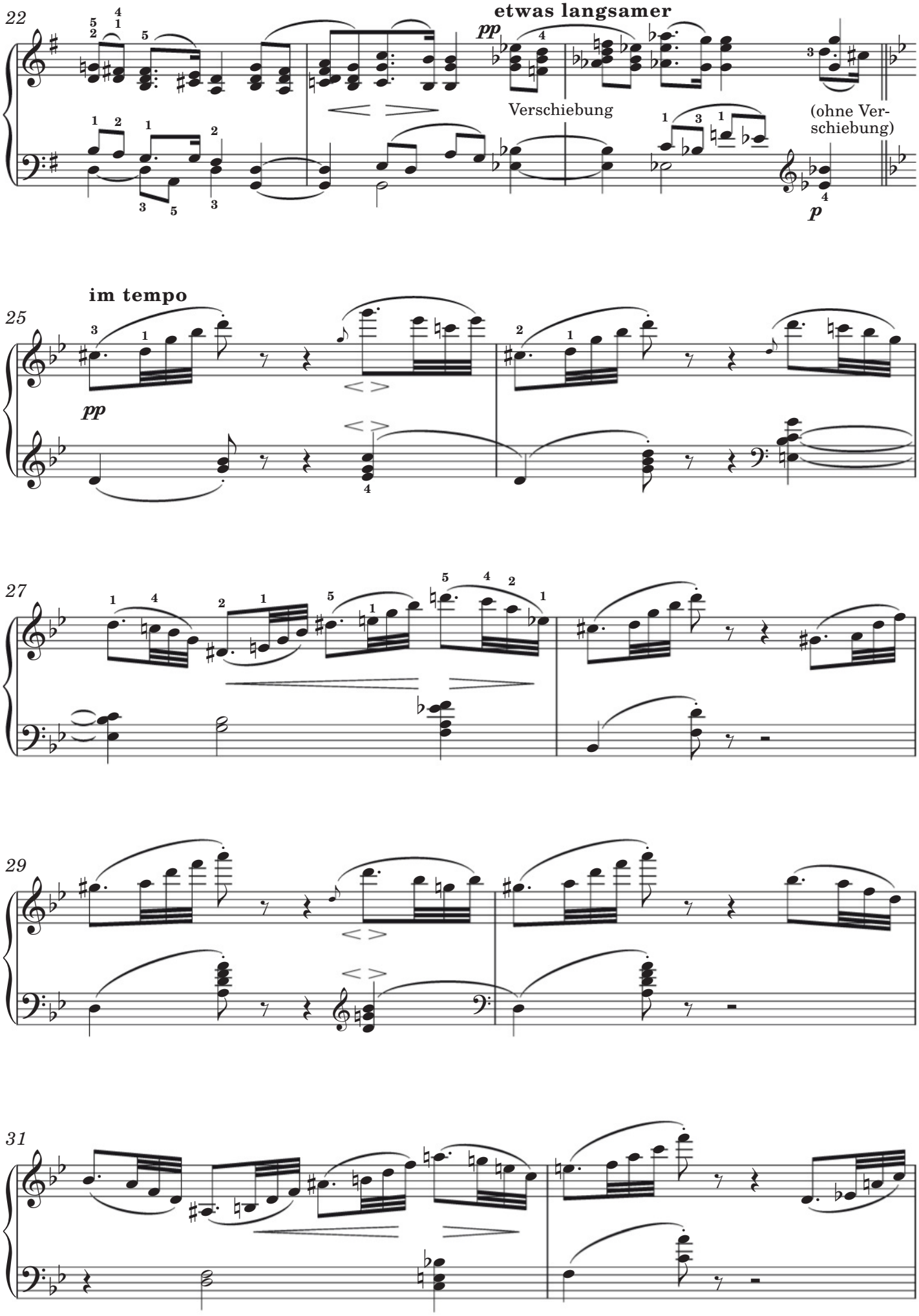
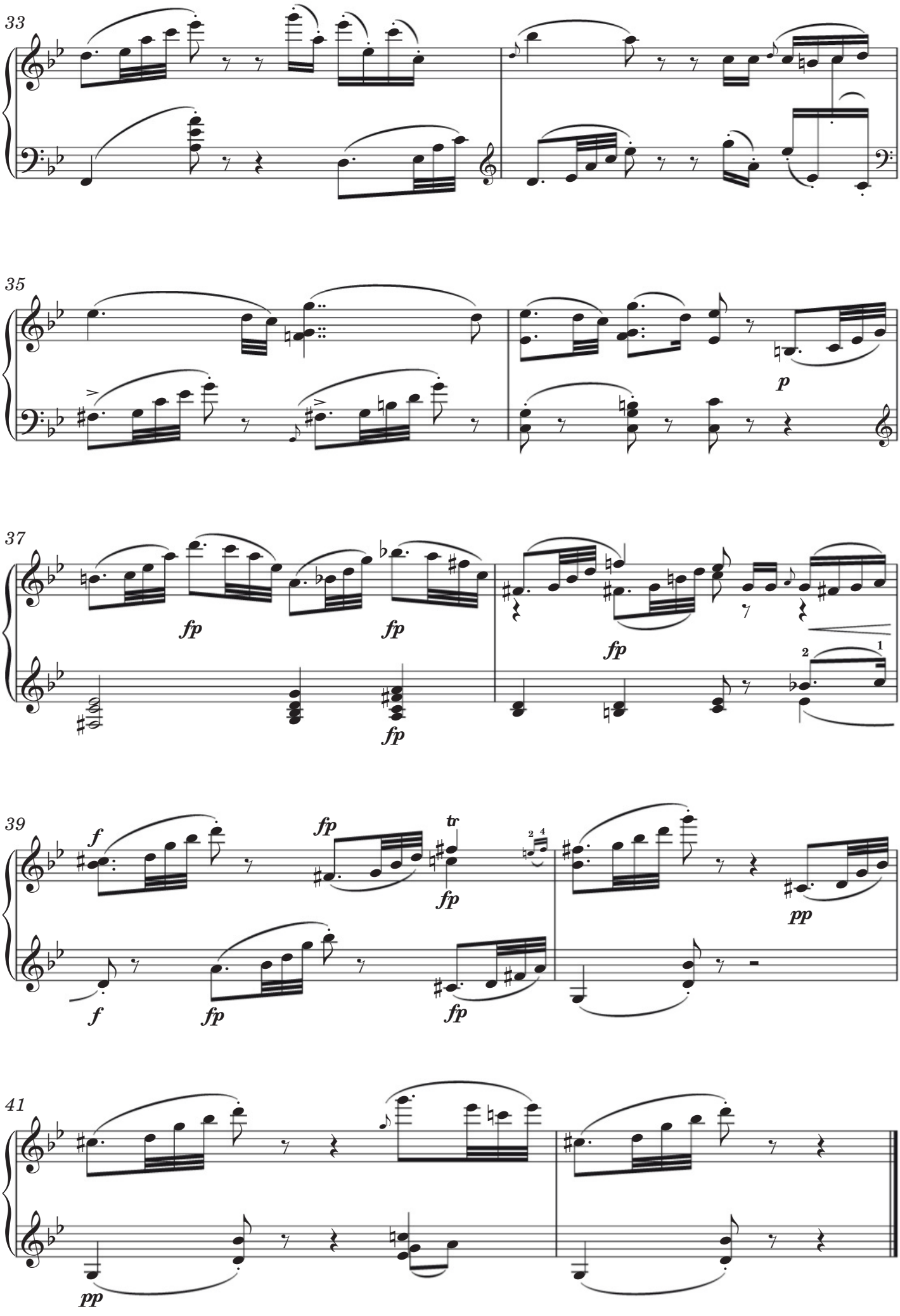
TRACK 12

DON'T MISS CORDELIA WILLIAMS' LESSON ON THIS PIECE

Robert SCHUMANN (1810-1856)

The Prophet Bird, No 7 from *Forest Scenes* Op 82

ADVANCED

*Forest Scene*s (in German, *Waldszenen*) Op 82 is a set of nine short solo piano pieces composed by Schumann between 1848 to 1849, first published in 1850-1851 in Leipzig by Bartholf Senff. The Prophet Bird (Vogel als Prophet) requires the ability to produce a beautiful tone, a wide range of dynamics plus oodles of imagination.
Read Cordelia Williams' enlightening lesson.

11
13
fp
fp
fp
fp
15
f
fp
tr
fp
f
fp
fp
pp
17
p
pp
19

22
etwas langsamer
pp
Verschiebung
(ohne Verschiebung)
p
25
im tempo
pp
27
29
31

33
35
p
37
fp
fp
fp
fp
2
1
39
f
fp
tr
fp
2 4
pp
f
fp
fp
41
pp

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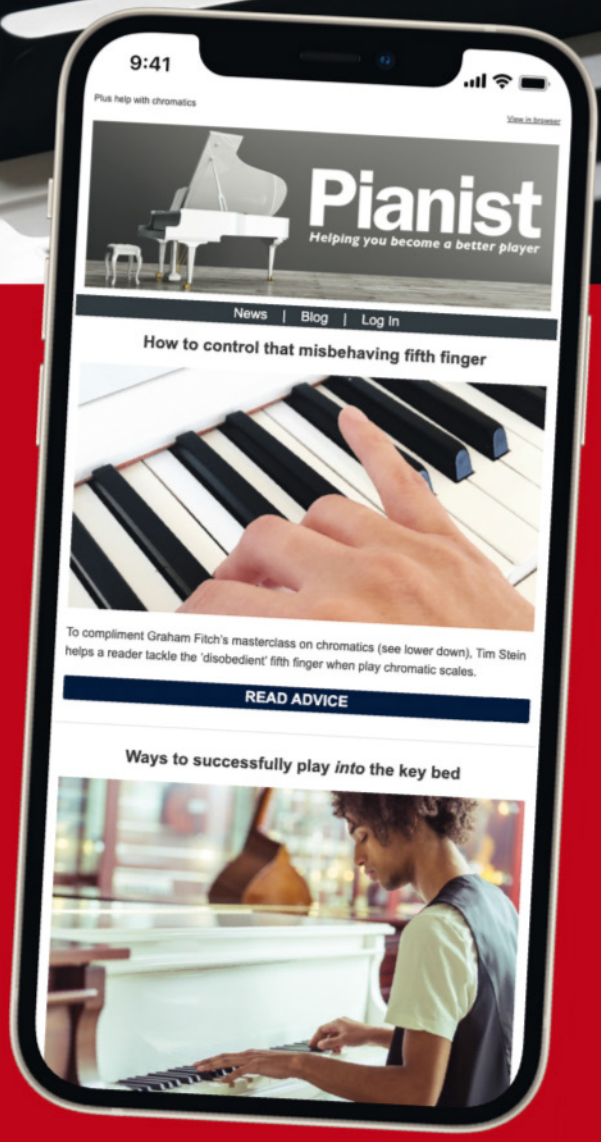

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PIANO TEACHER HELP DESK

Note to self – Teaching resolutions for 2024

Kathryn Page introduces some feisty and fun teaching ideas for the year ahead

Dear Kathryn, in 2024 I promise to….

1. Make every lesson I teach feel special.
The once-a-week appointment for pupils should never feel like a visit to the dentist! Lessons should energise and inspire daily practising.

2. Always see the glass as half full rather than half empty.
If a tutor is negative, a pupil will follow suit.

3. Always write lesson plans.
Structure is always positive – even if the schedule is abandoned during sessions.

4. Always review lessons.
Progress and attainment must be recorded and monitored.

5. Encourage and encourage again.
Ban the word 'No' from all your lessons and I guarantee your pupils will respond more effectively.

6. Support all my students with practice tips in every lesson.
All the pedagogy in the world is limited if a pupil cannot work on their own effectively in practice sessions.

7. Take 'no practising' as a great opportunity to lead a practice session rather than give a lesson.
Be a practice buddy and play with your non-practising pupils until they love it so much they cannot bare *not* to practise!

8. Stimulate student self-regulation.
Ultimately, we succeed as teachers when pupils find us superfluous. Making them independent quickly is vital for their musical growth.

9. Always develop the whole Musician.
Piano playing is so much more stimulating when it moves beyond mechanics.

10. Relate lessons to the bigger picture that is every student's whole life.
Music reflects and stimulates everything. Embrace life as you support and encourage your pupils.

11. Include singing in every lesson.
If we cannot breathe and sing a phrase, we cannot play it.

12. Make room for improvisation.
Creativity is a win-win phenomenon – and there are no 'mistakes' with improvisation.

13. Get off the piano stool and dance.
Music cannot exist as a static phenomenon.

14. Never cram schedules with back-to-back lessons.
If you are flustered and stressed, the vibes will have a bad effect on all your students.

15. Encourage students to learn pieces that are beautiful but well within their technical capabilities.
If you are constantly straining at the threshold of technical comfort, it is so much harder to project your music's inner picture.

16. Move away from grades and levels.
What would you prefer: Angela Hewitt playing Grade 2 selections from the *Anna Magdalena Notebook* or a disengaged student attempting a diploma programme?

17. Bring students together for duets and ensemble sessions.
The piano need never be an unsociable beast!

18. Organise concert trips.
Watching live music remains energising and can even be life affirming.

19. Encourage posture and healthy practice not just at the piano but in every aspect of life.
Children under the age of six inevitably have perfect seating positions and excellent gaits. We all owe it to ourselves not to lose this.

20. Remind every student that good sleep, food, exercise (physical, mental and spiritual) and hygiene is possibly more important than knowing fingerings for all your scales.
This surely is nothing but common sense.

21. Make every pupil love the recording process.
Overcome the fear of the microphone and confidence in performance will soar.

22. Encourage a love of sharing musical achievements.
Performance thrives from communication.

Kathryn Page (standing) has appeared in concert and on television as a soloist and in chamber music. She is a teacher, adjudicator and administrator for Chetham's International Summer School and Festival for Pianists. Her interest in contemporary music has led to many world premieres including works by Gary Carpenter, Alisdair Nicholson and Django Bates.

Encourage all your students to find a new recording, new composition or new artist they warm to so that they can share their new discovery with you.

23. Help pupils to get excited rather than nervous by exams, competitions and concerts.
Turn discomfort to pleasure: It's all a matter of attitude and perspective!

24. Develop the art of stagecraft fully for everyone who plays – from the first lesson beginner up to the seasoned adult returner.
Developing a natural and comfortable platform presence takes time but is deeply rewarding. Get even beginners in Lesson 1 used to walking onto an imaginary stage and bowing.

Happy New Year. May you continue to enjoy and develop your teaching through 2024 and beyond!

Yours truly

kathryn

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MAKING THE GRADE

As we approach the end of the year, most of us will succumb to the urge to look back, reflect, and for the most part hope to do better next year. As you ponder your year's pianistic progress, looking for new challenges or some fresh motivation, you may even consider entering an exam. If so, read on, says **Matthew Mills**. And if not, read on anyway because, well, you never know…

If you've never taken a piano exam, the idea can be daunting. Especially as an adult (which I assume most *Pianist* readers are, such wisdom traditionally being denied to the young), the thought of putting yourself on the spot and possibly embarrassing yourself in front of a total stranger might not be at the top of your list of New Year's resolutions. But here are two reasons why you should, I believe, consider it.

First, an exam sets you a deadline and a clear benchmark to reach. Playing a musical instrument is a lifelong journey of discovery and growth – and this is true whether you start aged six or 60. There is never a point when you can say 'I'm finished!' While this is one of music's greatest joys, at the earliest stages it can also be one of its greatest obstacles. This is where 'the grades' serve a useful purpose. They divide the beginner's journey into manageable and progressive steps and lay out some – but by no means all – of the skills expected of today's musicians.

Second, the exam will make your playing better, as long as you remember that an exam result is a record of what happened in *that* room on *that* day, that it is not a judgement on your potential or ability carved on a stone tablet. I have encountered several successful professional musicians who at some point failed an exam, and also plenty of 'Grade 8 distinctions' with less musicality than a tree stump! Confidence comes from both preparation and experience, and because exams require one and deliver the other, they are useful tools in our musical development, regardless of their outcome.

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Spice of life

Especially after the pandemic, which accelerated the roll-out of exams taken entirely online, there is a wide range of syllabuses and exam formats available. In the UK alone, the ABRSM offers 'Practical Grades' and 'Performance Grades'. TCL offers 'Face-to-Face' and 'Digital' grades; the latter with both 'technical' and 'repertoire-only' pathways. LCME offers 'Graded Exams', 'Recital Grades', 'Leisure Play', and 'Performance Awards'. Most traditional in format, ABRSM's Practical Grades, TCL's Face-to-Face Grades, and LCME's Graded Exams require you to play three pieces chosen from a set repertoire list, a selection of set technical works, and take sight-reading and aural tests in an exam room with an examiner. LCME also requires a 'discussion'. TCL offers improvisation and musical knowledge tests as optional alternatives to sight-reading and aural tests up to grade 5, beyond which sight-reading is compulsory but you can still choose between aural tests and improvisation. LCME's Recital Grades require four pieces and a choice between sight-reading and discussion; they can be taken in a live or recorded setting. ABRSM's Performance Grades, TCL's Digital Grades (Repertoire), and LCME's Leisure Play are video-recorded exams, requiring four pieces from the set repertoire lists. Leisure Play exams can also be taken in a live setting. TCL's Digital Grades (Technical) require only three pieces and a selection of technical work from the face-to-face exam requirements. LCME's Performance Awards require a video-recorded performance of three pieces from the set lists.

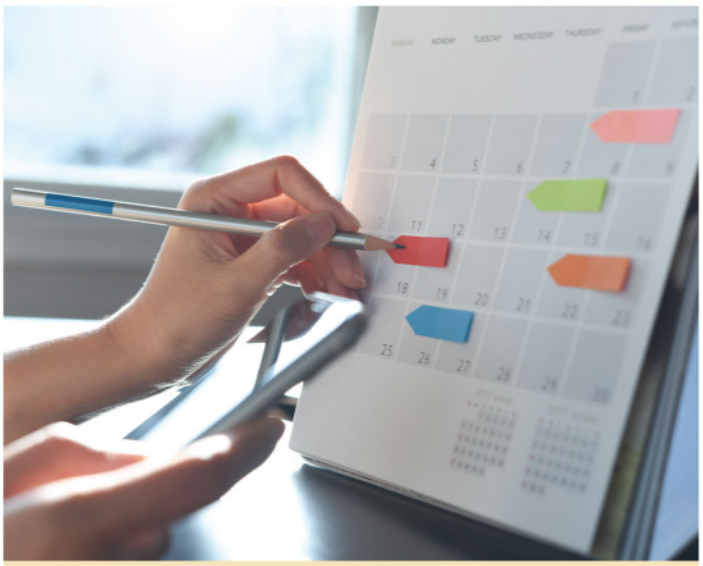
> 'Practice is about learning the piece, about making sure you 'get it right'; rehearsal is about making sure it never goes wrong'

Although the majority of video exams require less or no technical work, the entire exam must be presented in a single unedited take, and the marks available in a face-to-face setting from aural tests, sight-reading, or whatever, are instead allocated to something like 'performance' or 'presentation' or 'delivery'. In other words, the *entire* video is examined, not just the playing of the pieces; how you create atmosphere, how you handle stops, starts, and the silence in between pieces – in a word, your 'stagecraft' – is reflected in your result.

With so many options, you'll definitely find an exam format that suits your temperament, schedule, and musical ambitions and preferences. (Exams are offered in classical and jazz styles, as well as a slightly reduced selection in contemporary popular styles.) So, let's look at how, once you've made your choice, you can go about preparing for the exam in a positive and productive way.

Not all about practising

Your chosen exam format will influence how best to prepare. A video exam will take place in a comfortable environment, on a familiar instrument, and you can make as many attempts as you like to get through the whole programme, and your deadline is flexible. A face-to-face exam will be at a set time in a set ▶



Preparation timetable

6 months before

- Start exploring repertoire choices. At this stage there is no need to make concrete decisions; your choices will probably emerge as you progress.
- Practise at least one supporting test—aural, sight-reading, improvisation, and so on—every day.
- Start learning the required technical work hands apart, focusing on consistent fingering and 100% accuracy. Laying a solid foundation will pay huge dividends as the exam approaches.

3 months before

- Make your final repertoire choices.
- For inspiration, compile a playlist of your chosen repertoire. Listen to as many different recordings as you can find. The more you live with the music, the better you will know it and play it!
- As required, start working on the technical work with the hands together.

1 month before

- Begin incorporating silent practice into your routine. Thinking through your pieces and exercises away from the piano will help you to internalise them.
- The technical work should be known from memory. Aim also to increase your tempi to at least the minimum set in the syllabus.
- Try to play your repertoire for a small, informal audience of family or a few friends.

1 week before

- Rehearse everything once daily.
- Isolate any passages that cause concern and reserve intensive 'practice' for these alone.

The day before

- Relax! Do something that you enjoy: go for a swim, do a crossword, whatever occupies your mind.
- Do play, but as little as possible. If things go wrong (especially anything that usually goes well), stop.

location, on an unfamiliar (but decent) piano, and the pace of the exam will largely be set by the examiner.

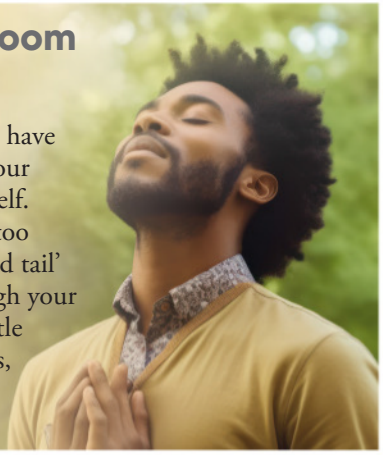
As always, remember that practising and rehearsing are different processes. Practice is about learning the piece, about making sure you 'get it right'; rehearsal is about making sure it never goes wrong. Or, to put it another way, the concentration required for practice is more intense; that required for rehearsal is more sustained but less effortful. Of course, both practice and rehearsal must be done *regularly*. As much as anything, playing the piano is a physical skill: it really can't be crammed in the three days leading up to the exam. The transition from 'practice' to 'rehearsal' can happen nearer to a face-to-face exam than a video recording. For the video, once you can successfully navigate each piece alone, it's time to consider the order of your programme, and how to create contrast with the performance, how to pace the silence between pieces and create an appropriate atmosphere before each piece begins. (It's not necessary to play from memory, but if you use scores, do rehearse moving the music onto and off the stand quickly and professionally. It's not good artistry to sit casually leafing through a book for twenty seconds before you find the right page!)

Mistakes happen

Given that it all has to be right the first time round (for video exams, it has to be recorded in one single take), begin by sitting at the piano, and rather than 'practising', play through one of your pieces, warts and all, then stand up and get on with your life. Once you can do this successfully, experiment with combinations of two pieces, then three, before finally sitting down and playing your entire programme in one sitting.

In the warm-up room

- Breathe!
- Remind yourself that you have done the work: trust in your preparation, and in yourself.
- Again, don't practise; it's too late for that now! 'Top and tail' each piece and run through your favourite scales just to settle yourself, calm your nerves, and 'get in the zone'.



Regardless of whether you're preparing for a live or recorded exam, this is a really powerful skill. Professionals make lots of mistakes. This might not mean that they play lots of wrong notes, but rather that they don't play the right ones quite how they wanted to. Whatever the mistake, a professional will not collapse as a result. Professionalism is as much about handling those things that don't go perfectly as it is about everything being perfect. Ensure one error doesn't become three. The more often you practise like this, the more readily you will let go of your mistakes, and the more fluid and effortless your playing will become. This is particularly true of sight-reading, by the way: if you're constantly stopping to correct things you've done wrong, you're not focusing on what's coming next, which is an instant flow-killer.

Of course, in an ideal world you would play every note of each piece, scale, and arpeggio flawlessly one hundred percent of the time. This would make you superhuman, and you shouldn't expect that of yourself. Examiners aren't just very experienced and well-qualified musicians; they're also human, and humane, beings. They understand that we all make mistakes, and that almost no-one is untouched by some feelings of nervousness in a performance situation. Your aim, rather than 'a hundred percent perfection', should be to give as good an account of yourself and, moreover, the music, as you can *under the circumstances*. Face-to-face exams are a series of short, sharp bursts of focus; there will be some 'downtime' while the examiner records their impressions. Also, particularly at lower grades, the odd false start or second attempt is usually sympathetically overlooked, provided this is the exception not the rule. Practise using these moments to prepare yourself for what's ahead, rather than dwelling on how badly you think you've just done!

If you've entered a face-to-face exam you will know exactly when everything has to be 'finished'. Given that this format of exam is, as it were, a heptathlon, not a marathon, there's no need to beat yourself up if some things are less 'ready' than others come exam day. Be pragmatic with your allocation of practice time. There's no point using all your daily practice sessions perfecting a C sharp minor scale in contrary motion only still to be learning the last 16 bars of one of your pieces the night before the exam! Just as it should, the majority of your result will reflect your playing of your chosen pieces, so this is where most of your preparation time should be spent. The mark for each element of the exam, too, is general: one dodgy scale won't fail your technical section; one awkward bar won't mean you don't pass your 'A-piece'.

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Deadlines, deadlines

I'm a great believer in checklists. With a plethora of scales, arpeggios, as well as three or four pieces to learn, something can easily slip through the net if you're not systematic. Divide your time proportionally between all tasks, and move on when the time is up; otherwise you risk getting stuck and using all your time on one thing, then everything else suffers. Try to cover everything as soon and as often as possible. This may seem impossible at first, but as you progress, you will increasingly find that you cover more of the requirements in less time.

While it is beneficial to set a timetable, a plan that's too detailed and rigid is likely to be abandoned if things don't happen on schedule. There should be enough flexibility that you can adjust as you go. Set target dates for milestones like knowing scales without the book, playing pieces fluently with the hands apart, and then together, and finally playing each piece end to end at the first attempt. Be ambitious but realistic, and above all allow leeway in your timetable lest something take longer than expected and cause you anxiety.

Always remember!

As the date approaches, if you find yourself worrying or feeling anxious, consciously remind yourself of why you want to sit the exam, why you chose the pieces you did, and why you love playing the piano! Write it all down, and read it aloud before each practice session.

Especially as the date draws nearer it's easy to fixate on 'problem areas' that loom ever larger. Dealing with them is a delicate balance of caring enough that you work hard to ensure you can get through the problematic passage with minimal disruption, and caring so little that you don't anticipate the issue by rushing the tempo, physically tightening, or otherwise making a challenging task even harder!

One of the teachers of one of my teachers used to say that you never really know a piece until you've played it in public 20 times. By then everything that could go wrong will have, so you can relax and just play it. The things that go wrong in performance are rarely those you were expecting to. Knowing that it's inevitable that things will go differently on the day, rehearsal is also about coping with the unexpected and persevering undefeated and undeterred, come what may. One of the best ways to do this is, of course, to play in front of other people as often as possible. It doesn't have to be in a formal setting; in fact, a relaxed environment might be better if you have little experience of playing to an audience.

You should also record your practice/rehearsal sessions regularly. Resist the temptation to listen straight away, but leave a few days between recordings and listenings. Listen with your 'examiner ears'. Is your tempo steady? Is your balance good? Are your dynamics consistent? Are your hands well synchronised? Is your playing *enjoyable*? If the list of things to focus on is overwhelming, each time you listen choose one or two aspects to focus on. Remember to note things that are good, too.

Of course, most of this advice applies to preparing not only for an exam, but for any performance. This, I believe, is the best way to view an exam – not as a test of your skills, but as a demonstration of your achievements. Who knows? You might enjoy the experience so much that a new year's resolution becomes a tradition. ■

Amateur aspirations

When sorting through the entries to this year's *Pianist* amateur piano competition, the judges were surprised to discover that many of the talented pianists work in the fields of IT, medicine and the sciences. What do they have in common? **John Evans** investigates

Pianist's inaugural amateur piano competition, which took place earlier this year, revealed the huge depth of piano playing talent among followers. Of course, there could only be two winners, one each in the two categories Classical and Modern, but everyone who took part can count themselves a winner in terms of preparing their pieces to a high standard.

So, as if we needed reminding, the competition revealed just what accomplished and ambitious followers *Pianist* is privileged to have but something else, too. Reviewing the list of highly placed and commended finishers, one thing stood out: many enjoy successful careers in IT, medicine and the sciences. True, some are also lawyers, financiers and business people but, at least among the competition's highly placed participants, they were fewer in number. Why so? What is it about IT, medicine and the sciences that attracts people to the piano and not only that, but also to play it well?

It's a question that many have sought an answer to for years. An ability at mathematics, a concept closely related to these careers, is the attribute most often referred to in this context. No formal research appears to have been done into the relationship between music and maths but there are plenty of theories and much anecdotal evidence to suggest a link exists. Among the former, the one most quoted is music's similarity to mathematics in the way its building blocks – rhythm, scales, harmony and pitch – are calculated and relate to each other. There's also a puzzle-solving aspect to understanding and navigating a score and a tendency for the music to form patterns that would be familiar to a mathematician.

Fixing bugs

On this point, Kathryn Page (left), one of the competition's judges and a teacher, adjudicator and administrator for Chetham's International Summer School in Manchester, says the evidence is clear. 'At Chethams, many students who are high flyers in maths, computing and the sciences are also high flyers on their instruments. I am sure it is to do with their fast processing speeds and a logical approach to working out solutions. Many of our younger students aged eight and nine are often seen playing and solving Rubik's Cubes quickly and easily. For them, music is another puzzle to be solved, so they're able to understand and assimilate what's on the musical page very quickly.'

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Although all this mathematics and problem-solving might seem a world away from music's power to move performers and listeners, mathematicians argue that numbers themselves can be beautiful and that mathematics can be as moving as music. 'Mathematicians would actually object to the idea that maths isn't interested in beauty,' says Cymra Haskell, professor of mathematics at the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences in California, who plays the violin. 'When I write down a proof of a result in mathematics, it feels like a puzzle coming together. There can be an intense pleasure in that, similar to the pleasure I feel when I listen to a beautiful piece of music or gaze at a beautiful painting or go for a walk in the mountains, on the beach or in a wood.'

But does this appreciation of mathematical beauty combined with an aptitude for problem solving necessarily persuade someone first, to play the piano and second, to play it well? Rob Rennie (pictured) was the winner of the competition's Modern category. He is a software engineer and lives in the US. He believes his early exposure to computers and programming has informed his approach to the piano. 'My dad brought a computer home when I was a kid and once I could build a program, he couldn't get me off it,' he recalls. 'Even after 40 years, I still love it. I like it the most when I, or a team I'm working with, is actively creating or building a new piece of software. I like it the least when the software is in maintenance mode or just fixing bugs. I will try to find a new greenfield project when that happens.'

In part inspired by the organ his father played (when it wasn't broken) Rennie started playing the piano, although only in earnest when he left home after high school. 'I don't know why I started playing the piano; it was just in me. It felt like a piece of a puzzle had fallen into place and I became obsessed with *understanding* and not just learning it. Come to think of it, there is an "isolated obsessive focus" to both my computer science and piano science studies. In both pursuits there is a coherent, mental model I am trying to reach.'

Abilities and impairments

Rennie's experience makes a strong argument for there being a link between maths or, in his case, computer programming and music but later in the same conversation he brings us back to earth with an alternative theory: that the competition's entry requirements may actually have encouraged people with a background in IT and the sciences to respond! 'Because the contest required the skill to create a video, copy it to something like Dropbox, fill out a PDF, email it and so on, perhaps there were quite a few IT folks who responded to this contest because of their familiarity with these processes.'

Nevertheless, Rennie's account of being obsessed with the piano is something Professor Adam Ockleford (above) of the Centre for Learning, Teaching and Human Development at the University of Roehampton in London observes in the savants he works with. Such people are notable for their exceptional abilities in a particular field, while having significant impairment in others. 'These people are motivated to do one thing extremely well, at the expense of everything else,' says Ockleford, an authority on music and psychology who has worked extensively with Derek Paravicini, the celebrated pianist and savant. 'To a lesser degree, the same applies to blind people. Many of them have perfect pitch, since sound enables them to make sense of the world.'

Based on his experience, Ockleford rejects the idea, floated in some quarters, of a neural substrate or musical gene enabling savants like Paravicini to play the piano to a remarkably high standard. By extension, he also dismisses the notion of a gene deftly enabling mathematicians, scientists, physicians and IT workers to play the piano better than those pursuing other professions. Instead, he believes the experience Rennie describes of doggedly learning to programme a computer and the attitude of mind this early exposure to problem solving instilled in him is one of the keys to being able to play an instrument, such as the piano, well.

'Social rather than musical factors explain our ability to play music,' he says. 'The attitudinal, psychological and environmental evidence is overwhelming.' As to whether an ability at maths automatically translates into an ability to play music, Ockleford is equally clear. 'Most musicians are hopeless at maths! You don't need an algorithm to catch a ball; instead you catch it instinctively. Similarly, you don't need to understand maths to play the piano and feel the music.' Kathryn Page would agree. Her own children are not good at maths, she says, but are 'fantastic musicians!'

Musical medicine

We've examined how maths or the sciences and IT might benefit music but for Noah DeGarmo (left), a US-based physician whose playing was highly commended in the competition's Classical category, it is music that has benefited his medical career. 'The skills I learned as a child, spending hours concentrating on practising, helped to provide a base for my medical work. Medicine requires intense concentration and emergency medicine requires an insane amount of multi-tasking, which is similar to playing the piano in that with each piece there are always many things going on at once.'

DeGarmo began learning the piano at the age of seven but at 16 made the decision to follow a career in medicine when, tragically, his father died of a heart attack. 'His death sparked my interest in medicine. I knew that being a musician is a hard career and that only a select few succeed, so I wanted to choose a career where I could help people but keep music as a serious hobby and something that I love with a passion.'
Inevitably, both pursuits overlap to some degree. For example, he enjoys the challenges presented by complex medical cases just as he enjoys the challenge of preparing, playing and performing classical music. 'I have many friends in medicine who are also classical musicians,' he says. 'There is definitely a link between the two.'

So far in this article, those with an ability in maths, IT and the sciences claim no special musical gifts. Rather, they say, it's how these abilities inform their approach to a piece of music that helps them to master and enjoy it. Graham Scott (pictured), Head of the

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Lucy Parham's Celebrity Christmas Gala

Every December, *Pianist* contributor Lucy Parham presents her Celebrity Christmas Gala concert at King's Place in London. All the participants are amateurs (bar curator Parham, naturally), and unlike those mentioned within this article, most are celebrities of the stage, screen, journalism… even politics! So what makes them excel?

'These are all high achieving people in their chosen fields,' says Parham. 'For some the piano is a form of relaxation, almost an alternative to meditation. Some are late starters and for others the piano was a discipline learnt from childhood. But the common feature that unites them all, regardless of level, is a love of the instrument. That's why I present this concert every year – to show everyone that many people *love* to play, no matter what their standard is. 'Politician Ed Balls was an adult beginner at the start, and he has amazed me with his progress over the years. Actress Emilia Fox loves to play duets as a way of winding down after a long day filming, and ex-Guardian editor Alan Rusbridger has even written a book about playing the piano. Comedian and actor Alistair McGowan took the Gala so seriously that he ended up releasing an album and went on tour!'

Lucy Parham's Celebrity Christmas Gala takes place on 3 December (www.kingsplace.co.uk). Prior to that, she appears at the Barbican Centre on 26 Nov, with the actor Sir Simon Russell Beale, in her Composer Portraits show on Rachmaninov (www.barbican.org.uk).

School of Keyboard Studies at the Royal Northern College of Music, agrees. 'Of course, there are similarities between music and maths; form, structure and rhythm are all based around numbers. However, having the kind of clear-headed, analytical approach associated with someone with mathematical ability is extremely helpful when preparing and analysing music and meeting its various challenges. Certainly, a high proportion of our students possess excellent analytical and numerical skills. However, music encompasses everything from the physical to the emotional. Maths is just one aspect of it. To truly be a musician, you need emotional commitment and communicative power.'

Emotion rules

These last two points are easily forgotten in any discussion around maths and playing the piano. Ability in the former may help one be a better pianist but the ability to connect with your listener, to move them and to take them on your musical journey are not learned by programming a computer. Which is not to say the competition's highly placed finishers are deficient in this respect. For example, regarding Rennie's performance, the judges were full of praise for his energy, his ability to communicate his love for the music, his atmospheric, gentle and sensitive playing and his passion and feeling for the music. 'I would say that I lean towards the emotional side,' says Rennie. 'In fact, this is a characteristic I see among the musicians I know in analytical careers. I don't think you can create compelling music without imbuing it with your emotions and you have to have emotions to do that.'

> 'There is an "isolated obsessive focus" to both my computer science and piano science studies. In both pursuits there is a coherent, mental model I am trying to reach'
>
> **Rob Rennie**

Meanwhile, DeGarmo says that his goal in every performance, 'is to get the listener out of themselves and evoke emotion in whatever form that may be.' Elena Smekalova, a biochemist in the US who was commended for her playing in the Classical category, says that what she enjoys most about playing the piano is 'making sound and music; becoming a part of beautiful compositions and being able to experience emotions and ideas put together by a composer.' These are not the words of pianists happy just to analyse scores, work out fingerings and count beats; rather, they show a high degree of musical intelligence.

We'll leave the final words to Rennie. 'In both disciplines (computer programming and piano playing) we are trying or reaching for something "out there" that we have to pull in through our heads and get out through these funny little contrived devices. We have some guides, whether it's a programming tutorial or sheet music or teachers. But ultimately what is created at the end is inherently, and impossible not to be, unique. Maybe we're just enjoying tapping into something quantum mechanical; something that until we observe it, doesn't really exist. I'm starting to get a little goofy so I'm going to stop thinking about it and just go play!' ■

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STAY IN THE KNOW

DIGITAL DEXTERITY

Why not make 2024 the year to become more app savvy? **Owen Mortimer** gets your fingers ready for action by presenting his pick of the top 10 apps to help you develop your skills at the keyboard

The range and quality of piano apps for smartphones and tablets has burgeoned in recent years and there is a now a plethora of options available. Whether you are looking for step-by-step lessons for beginners, ways to improve your memorisation skills or new repertoire ideas, you can now find an app to meet your goals.

Yousician – over 20 million users worldwide

One of the most established and widely used apps for pianists is **Yousician**, which describes itself as 'the world's leading platform to learn and play music'. Launched in 2014 and now available for five instruments including piano, Yousician currently boasts over 20 million users worldwide. It offers two complementary learning pathways, dubbed Missions and Workouts. The Missions run from levels 1 to 9, starting at the beginning of every player's journey with basics like the C Position and how to read notation. By the time you reach level 5, you should be able to master basic pieces with chords and melodies, accompany yourself and play with others. Workouts help to hone specific skills such as scales and arpeggios, while weekly Challenges offer further opportunities put yourself to the test. Repertoire runs the gamut from classical to pop, including pieces specially commissioned by Yousician. Pricing for a single Premium account starts at £4.99 per month. *www.yousician.com*

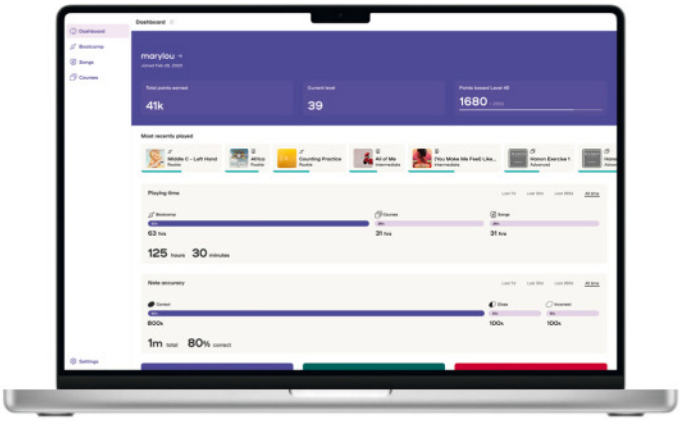
Flowkey was launched in 2015 and since 2020 has been endorsed by Yamaha. Over 10 million pianists from 100 countries have used Flowkey to learn the piano thanks to the wide range of repertoire it offers – from classical to jazz, film music and Asian pop. As well as over 1,500 pieces to choose from, there are eight step-by-step courses that take the player from the basics of the piano to improvising with chords and mastering scales. The app's split-screen format makes it easy to see how the notation translates to the keyboard, and there are a variety of useful tools for practising hands separately, altering the tempo and repeating difficult passages. Flowkey 'listens' to the player via a microphone if using an acoustic piano, or USB/Bluetooth connection for digital pianos, giving real-time feedback on the accuracy of your performance. A monthly Premium subscription costs €19.99. *www.flowkey.com*

'Life is better with music' says **Pianote**, which started out as a CD- and DVD-based training course for pianists in 2008. The website followed in 2016. What makes their approach different is a weekly live Q&A session at which students can ask questions or get feedback about video clips of themselves playing. The website also features a wealth of online learning materials based around the Pianote Method. This is divided into 10 Levels, each of which comprises three Courses of 4-8 video Lessons. Digital training packs focus on specific areas of technique, with titles such as 'Faster Fingers' and 'De-Stupefy Your Left Hand', while the Song Library contains over 1,000 pieces of classical, jazz, pop, gospel and Latin music. An annual subscription costs $197. *www.pianote.com*

Piano Marvel is designed to be used with or without a teacher. It features an extensive library of over 25,000 pieces and technical exercises – including method books from leading publishers such as Hal Leonard and Alfred. The curriculum covers six levels, encompassing lessons on Method and Technique. One of the app's best features is its Sight-Reading Assessment, which requires a score of at least 80 per cent to progress to the next piece. Teachers who use the app can upload lessons to track the progress of their students. A monthly subscription is priced at $15.99, or $110.99 for the year. *www.pianomarvel.com*

German app **Skoove** makes the bold claim of being 'the most complete online learning method'. It uses AI to listen to students and provide personalised feedback designed to speed up the learning process. The app's growing curriculum currently runs to more than 500 online lessons, covering everything from learning notation and developing technique to playing classical repertoire and chart hits. Backing tracks are available for some of the most popular repertoire. Premium subscriptions also include one-on-one support from Skoove's instructors. An annual subscription costs £10.41 per month.

www.skoove.com

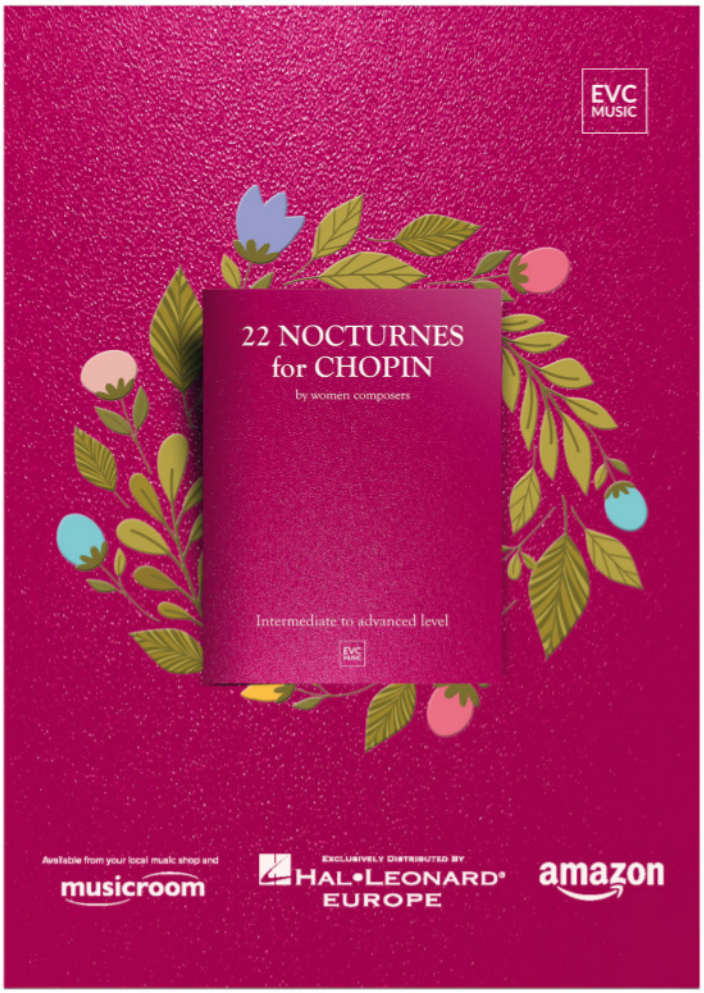


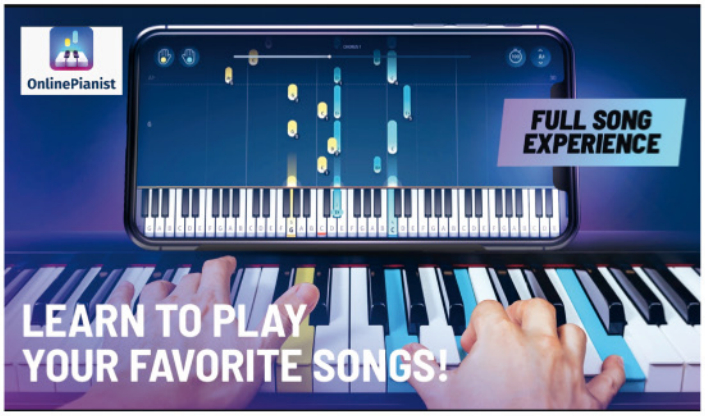
Playground Sessions – a starry roster of teachers

For those looking for a piano app with star appeal, **Playground Sessions** is the go-to choice. Created by the legendary American music producer Quincy Jones, its roster of celebrity teachers includes Harry Connick Jr and David Bowie's long-time pianist, Mike Garson. The design of the app has a game-like aspect designed to make learning fun. Bootcamp sessions introduce fundamental concepts and techniques while Courses explore specific topics in greater depth. The library of Songs contains over 2,000 popular pieces, many of which are offered in multiple versions for different skill levels. Annual membership is $12.49 per month, or you can sign up for a lifetime for $349.99. *www.playgroundsessions.com*

Simply Piano – lots of famous pieces to learn

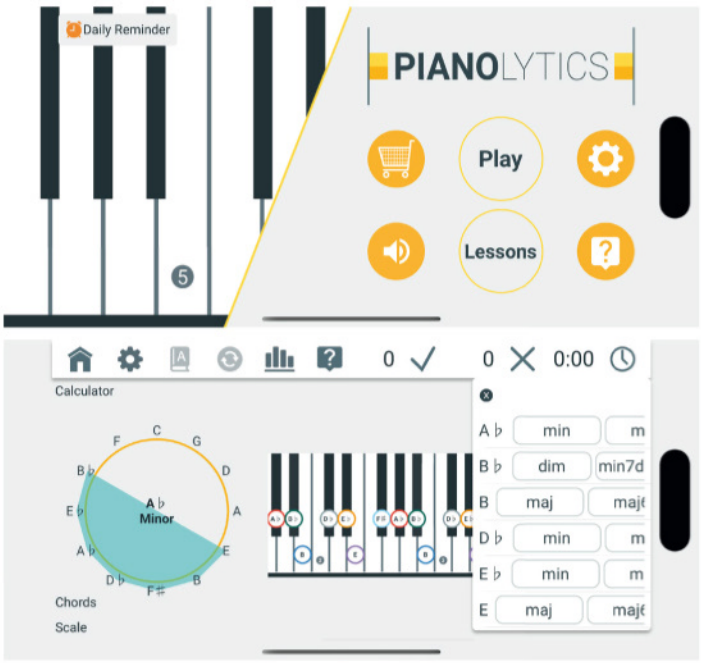
Simply Piano is structured around 27 mini courses divided into two streams: Soloist and Chords. Lessons in Soloist mode offer a range of basic repertoire, including well-known Classical and Baroque pieces such as Beethoven's *Für Elise* and the Minuet in G from Bach's *Anna Magdalena Notebook.* The courses on Chords are designed for players who want to accompany pop, rock and jazz songs. There is also a series of 5-Minute Workout sessions, which reinforce concepts and techniques learnt in the courses. Subscriptions are priced at $149.99 per year, $89.99 for six months or $59.99 for three months. *join-piano.hellosimply.com*



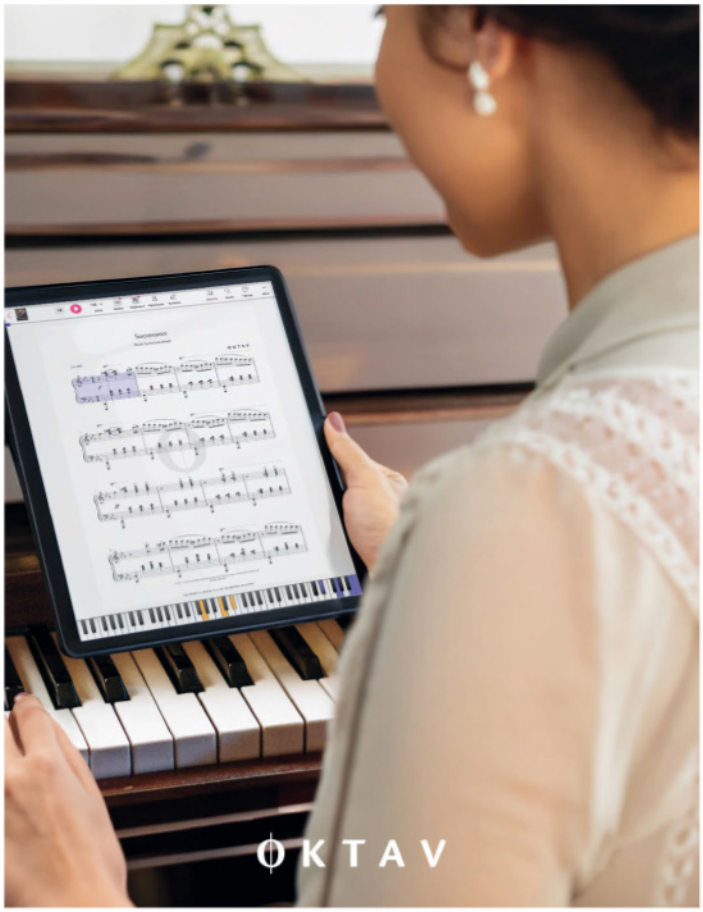
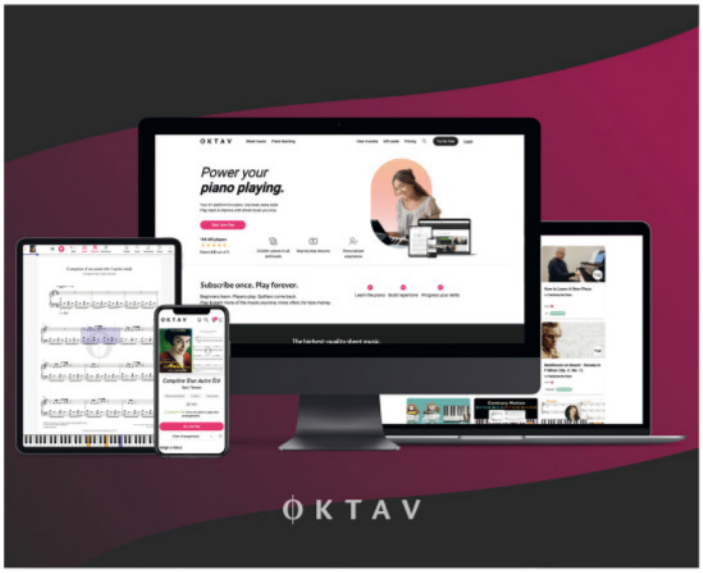


OnlinePianist – dozens of virtual piano tutorials

Players who don't yet read notation can start to pick up keyboard skills using **OnlinePianist**, which offers dozens of virtual piano tutorials online. Its split-screen visualiser can be customised to isolate one hand, alter the tempo and add or remove note names from the keys. Lessons on each piece break down the music into manageable sections, and some pieces are offered in multiple arrangements – Beginner and Pro – to suit different skill levels. Sheet music is available to download and print at home via OnlinePianist's desktop service. Subscriptions costs $59.99 per year, $41.99 for six months or $29.99 for three months. *www.onlinepianist.com*



Pianolytics – great ways to check your progress

Visualisation is also key to **Pianolytics**, which has been designed to aid memorisation at the piano. A series of progressively challenging games focus on notes, chord patterns, intervals and scales in order to help players master the piano step by step. Switch to Lesson mode for guidance or pick Play mode if you already know which game you want to play. Detailed statistics allow you to check you progress over time. The app is free to download and to unlock Analytics Premium costs £22.99 per year, or £2.99 per month. *www.pianolytics.com*



OKTAV – partnering with leading publishers

Last but by no means least comes **OKTAV**, a sheet music library that offers users personalised repertoire recommendations from over 20,000 scores, ranging from core classical repertoire to jazz, Broadway, Latin and contemporary crossover music. Leading publishers working with OKTAV include Alfred, Bärenreiter, Faber, Schott, Sony and Universal. The app's range of learning content features Song Tutorials and play-along arrangements to help players learn pieces from scratch. Premium Learning users can also access over 100 video courses, guidance from expert piano teachers and annotated scores with fingerings. Annual subscriptions start at £9.08 per month. *www.oktav.com*

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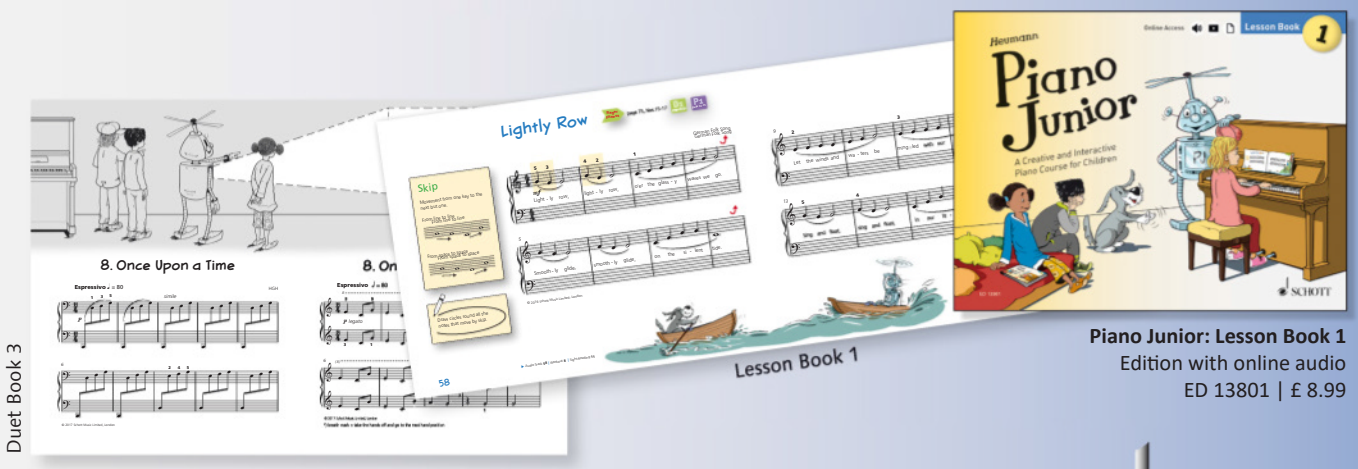

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ALBUM REVIEWS

Reviews by **Peter Quantrill**, **Dave Jones** and **Warwick Thompson**

IGOR LEVIT

Fantasia: Works by Bach, Berg, Busoni, Liszt
Sony Classical 19658811642 (2CDs)
★★★★

Strap yourselves in: it's time for Levit's annual release, as ever a project of high intellectual as much as musical ambition, self-evidently years in the preparation. Bach's Chromatic Fantasia falls on the ear in cascades, the mechanics of the instrument transcended – as Brendel achieved from time to time – to become the poet's voice. The voice of the following Fugue begins bravely in a whisper, and the Sonata of Liszt is then plotted on a much larger scale with the same irrefutable logic. Levit presents the B minor as a stylistic sequel to the 'Hammerklavier' – and as a literal prequel to the Op 1 Sonata of Berg, which is phrased in aching, subsiding arches as though Lisztian architecture were now crumbling under the age of dissonance and weight of chromaticism. Busoni's *Fantasia contrappuntistica* comes as a necessary act of healing and features some of the simplest and most sheerly beautiful playing on the album. **PQ**

EWA POBŁOCKA

Bach: *The Well-Tempered Clavier* Book 2
Chopin Institute NIFCCD144-145 (2CDs)
★★★★★

The resonance of a Polish Radio studio in Warsaw, and the tonal palette of a Shigeru Kawai piano, bring old-school virtues of warmth and clarity to Bach's counterpoint as much as Pobłocka's pianism. She is never in a hurry. The C minor fugue unfolds with quiet, spacious inevitability rather than the severe rigour of many modern interpreters (and no cutesy Picardy third at the end). I love her luminous rubato for the C sharp minor Prelude, like a slow sunrise then a brisk wake-up call. Trills, even in the French-accented F sharp major pair, are always ornaments to the line, tucked in gracefully like lace on a sleeve. A subtle use of pedal bestows a halo of radiance on points of inwardness such as the D sharp minor fugue. Pobłocka measures up to the progressively more serious and philosophical tone of the set as a whole, before the B minor sends us off like a Goldberg aria reprise. **PQ**

RARITIES OF PIANO MUSIC AT SCHLOSS VOR HUSUM 2022

Rare repertoire performed by selected pianists at the annual German festival
Danacord DACOCD 969
★★★★★

The North German 'Rarities' festival has been running since 1987, and does what it says on the tin: presents overlooked works by major composers, and pieces by lesser-knowns which deserve a hearing. This live album of highlights from the 2022 jamboree is a veritable chocolate box of pleasures, and certainly made this reviewer want to start searching out some of the sheet music. Nadejda Vlaeva plays a stonking *Play, Piano, Play: Toccata* by Friedrich Gulda which brings the house down; Nicolas Stavy offers an absolutely ravishing *Romance* Op 56 by Mel Bonis; there's a wild improvisation on a song by Charlie Chaplin by Antonio Pompa-Baldi; Kolja Lessing plays the utterly charming *Variations on a Well Known Tune* by Ignace Strasfogel… and there's a heap more. The persuasive energy of all of the pianists is a joy to experience. **WT**

CHRISTIAN SANDS

Christmas Stories: *Jingle Bells; Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas; Silent Night* etc
Mack Avenue MAC1206
★★★★★

Christian Sands is one of the finest jazz pianists of his generation. The opener Jingle Bells transforms into a jazz waltz in the manner of Miles Davis's *All Blues*, the latter part of *Let it Snow!* is briefly a vehicle for a high-quality drum solo by Ryan Sands, and *God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen* evolves into a Latin romp. *Snow Dayz* is a Sands original, in a jazz/rock vein, adding nice variety to the mood in the middle of the album. *Shoveling* is a beautifully played solo piano feature, amongst a predominantly band-orientated set, and there's some excellent ensemble improvisation to gradually close *The Gift*. Another solo piano feature, *Last Christmas* (this time enhanced by a tasteful string arrangement), closes the album peacefully. This album could well please jazz fans and some casual Christmas listeners alike, providing something quite different to the usual fayre at this time of year; it's much more about the musical quality than the novelty. **DJ**

YAARA TAL

1923: Works by Delius, Bloch, Hauer, Mompou, Klein, Janáček etc
Sony Classical 19658803802
★★★

Yaara Tal is perhaps best known as half of the splendiferous Tal-Groethuysen Duo (if you've never caught their wonderful album of Czerny duets, then do), but here she appears mostly on her own in an album exploring works composed in 1923, or, in one case, soon after. It's a fascinating mix: there's some dreamy Delius, some faux-folk from Janáček and Frederico Mompou, there's plinky-plonky atonalism from Schoenberg, and biting irony in Fritz Klein's *Die Maschine* (all those oh-so-satirical hammering rhythms.) She plays wonderfully well, and is a superb advocate for some of the lesser known repertoire, but the 'portrait of an era' principle of repertoire selection makes for a somewhat academic listening experience: perhaps more enjoyable to researchers than mere civilians. That said, I completely fell for the last item, *3 Entrées dansantes*: three witty jazz-inspired dances with a decidedly Gallic flavour by Émile Jaques-Dalcroze. **WT**

SERGIO TIEMPO

Hommage: With Martha Argerich, Nelson Freire, Karin Lechner, Mischa Maisky, Alan Weiss
Avanti Classic AVA10552
★★★★★

On his new collaborative album, 51-year-old Venezuelan-Argentinean pianist Sergio Tiempo reveals once again why he's such a frequent guest at the toppest of top-drawer venues in the world. The title refers to the gratitude he feels towards his mentors – musicians of the calibre of Martha Argerich, Nelson Friere (with us no more, alas), Alan Weiss, and cellist Mischa Maisky – and his affection shines through in a series of duets with them. He fizzes with fun in Brahms's Hungarian Dances with Weiss, is on fire with Argerich in Schubert's F minor Fantasy, and creates more pianistic colours than you ever thought possible with his sister Karin in Tchaikovsky's duet arrangement of the *Serenade for Strings*. It's truly one of those rare discs in which an obvious atmosphere of personal affection, playfulness and joie-de-vivre has survived the recording and editing process and shines out in a golden blaze of delight. **WT**

SHEET MUSIC REVIEWS

Reviews by **Michael McMillan**

TRINITY COLLEGE LONDON PIANO EXAMS EXTENDED EDITIONS

Initial to Grade 1-8

Trinity College

With every iteration of their piano syllabuses, examining boards look for marginal gains to cement their customer base and attract further custom. Trinity's previous exam syllabuses have nominally covered a three-year period (the previous set of books was for 2021-2023) so it's interesting to note this new set of books is marked 'from 2023', suggesting longer-term validity. The overall presentation has had a facelift, both on the inside and outside. The cover artwork and title layout is easier on the eye, whilst the final two grades benefit from smyth sewn binding. On the inside, the musical text is crisper and the fingering font size is in better proportion to the noteheads – a perfect example of a marginal gain!

In terms of quantity of repertoire choice, the ABRSM raised the bar in their latest syllabus by offering 39 pieces per grade, beating Trinity's 35 pieces in their former syllabus. Trinity have responded by inflating their syllabus choice to an eye-popping 56 pieces, 21 of which are printed in this extended edition (the standard edition contains 12). And whilst the ABRSM have cautiously introduced arrangements of popular music, Trinity have gone barrelling into that territory in such a way that at Grade 8 one could choose to present a programme of 'Cha-La Head-Cha-La' from *Dragon Ball Z*, 'Rule the World' by Take That, and 'Coconut Mall' from *Mario Kart Wii*. This will inevitably provoke discussions where the role of tradition and core repertoire are set against modern tastes and the notion of progressiveness.

There are many excellent arrangements across the grades, and plentiful contemporary composers are featured, whilst the repertoire selectors have also unearthed a surprising quantity of less familiar Baroque, Classical, and Romantic repertoire. Perhaps due to the existence of so much new content, there does seem to be a rather wide range of difficulty within grades. Both standard and extended editions are available in print and as e-books, whilst digital copies of individual pieces are also available on Trinity's website.

THE PAM WEDGWOOD CHRISTMAS COLLECTION

Pam Wedgwood

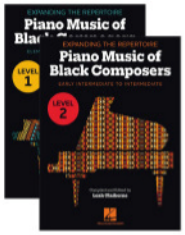
Faber

This book contains a generous selection of pieces from Pre-Grade 1 up to Grade 6 written by Pam Wedgwood over the course of the past three decades. 28 of the 32 pieces have been previously published in volumes such as *It's Never Too Late to Play Christmas* and *After Hours Jazz Christmas*, whilst four have been written especially for this collection. Seven original works by Wedgwood are included but most of the pieces are arrangements of well-known carols and songs. These have been given novel introductions and endings, recreating the familiar music in a fresh light, and light jazzy harmonic touches give the traditional numbers a more modern flavour. Recommended.

THE HARRY POTTER ANTHOLOGY

Faber

Piano wizards capable of casting musical spells around Grade 4 to 6 will find much to enjoy in this large, 200-page book. Boasting a fancy cover with reflective print, it contains more than 50 musical potions created by the five composers (John Williams, Patrick Doyle, Nicholas Hooper, Alexandre Desplat, and James Newton Howard) involved in the eight Harry Potter and three Fantastic Beasts films. The atmospheric colour of the orchestral scores is inevitably reduced in these piano reworkings but the transcriptions are faithful to the original music, and the arrangements are almost always pianistically conceived. The book is pricey but would make an ideal gift for Harry Potter fans.



PIANO MUSIC OF BLACK COMPOSERS

Levels 1 and 2

Edited by Leah Claiborne

Hal Leonard

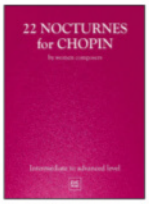
30 pieces are split between these two books edited by Leah Claiborne, and these are presented in order of difficulty from Grade 0 to 5. Almost half the selection is devoted to Blanche Thomas's straightforward arrangements of plantation songs such as *Steal Away* and *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*. The next most represented composer is Claiborne herself, with five neat little pedagogic pieces in the first book, and I'm pleased to discover the imaginative works by Hale Smith. Greater quantity of music would have been desirable since half the pieces are one-page long, but otherwise a collection worth investigating.

ISATA KANNEH-MASON PIANO INSPIRATION

Grades 4-6 (Bk 1); Grades 7-8+ (Bk 2)

ABRSM

Having Isata Kanneh-Mason promote a piano repertoire collection is an interesting marketing ploy by the ABRSM, and raises an interesting question as to whether a book should simply be judged on the strength of its repertoire selection and quality of presentation, or if there is something extra that the personality of the collection's curator adds. The quantity of music is average but the repertoire selection is bold, including composers such as Coleridge-Taylor, Desplat, and Lutosławski, whilst the Clara Schumann Nocturne is a lesser-known gem. Those interested in Kanneh-Mason's musical journey will naturally be drawn to these books, but even if you haven't heard of her, these are attractively presented collections.



22 NOCTURNES FOR CHOPIN BY WOMEN COMPOSERS

EVC Music

This book is the brainchild of Rose McLachlan, the daughter of the esteemed musician Murray McLachlan, and is the product of a call to unpublished women composers around the world to write a piece inspired by Chopin's Nocturnes. 16 of the 80 received entries are published in this volume, in addition to six commissions by established composers such as Zoe Rahman and Heather Hammond. The pieces are Grade 6 to 8 and range from melodious works that mimic Chopin's romantic spirit to more harmonically unpredictable pieces; there's even a humorous jazzy romp by Nancy Litten based on Chopin's Nocturne Op 55 No 1. A great concept, with several pieces well worth exploring.

PIANIST AT WORK

MARTIN JAMES BARTLETT

The dashing British pianist on getting into the groove for his new dance-inspired album

Martin James Bartlett plays Rachmaninov

Your new recording is called *La Danse*. Does it help to have an album with a theme?
I've always enjoyed thematic programming, as a performer and a listener. I think as an audience member a theme can make the musical journey more approachable and give it a sense of structure. I also hugely enjoy discovering all the variety of connections between composers, music, arts and cultures that inherently comes when exploring a theme.

What made you decide on dances?
I've always loved to go to the ballet and enjoyed its intrinsic link to music. However, being a (no exaggeration) heinously awful dancer myself, the only way I can experience the joy of dancing is through my fingers! I had already learnt Rameau's Gavotte and Doubles and curated a programme beginning with it and ending with Ravel's *La Valse*. Exploring these hugely contrasting French dances inspired me to discover other styles of French dances that existed.

You've chosen such real gems as Couperin's *Les Barricades mystérieuses* and Ravel's *Pavane pour une infante défunte*. Have you grown up with these pieces?
I did grow up listening to these pieces, especially the *Pavane*, which my mother's piano students used to play. I loved the timeless elegance and yearning nostalgia that it suggests. The *Barricades* for me is a piece well beyond its time and it might very well even be a desert island piece of music for me!

What have you learnt along the way, in terms of technique?
This album is full of entirely different pianistic techniques. The Baroque repertoire requires a clean, clarity of touch, and the Rameau, especially, is very virtuosic in style. This is no surprise given that he was a great innovator in keyboard techniques. For the Impressionistic works in the centre of the album one needs a soft, smooth touch with a capacity to be incredibly delicate on the keys. Of course, the last work on the album, Ravel's *La Valse*, is monumental in technical detail. It has to have a grand sweeping structure but not at the expense of the intricate details along the way. Especially as it's originally an orchestral poem there's a lot of work to be done in producing an 'orchestral' sound and being able to imitate different instruments and textures on the piano.

Great to see the Reynaldo Hahn *Ruban Dénoué* waltzes for two pianos appear on the album, with Alexandre Tharaud.

How did the two of you connect?
Alexandre Tharaud and I first met in Dresden a few years back when we were both giving recitals there. I asked him for advice in creating a French programme and he suggested exploring the works of Venezuelan-born French composer Reynaldo Hahn. Whilst looking through his piano works I discovered the beguiling *Ruban Dénoué* waltzes for two pianos and invited Alexandre to collaborate. After all, I couldn't release a dance disc without some collaboration! It's been such a joy to work with someone who has such an affinity and knowledge of the French repertoire, and it's been very serendipitous that we are both signed to Warner Classics!

What's dance-like about Debussy's *Arabesque* No 1?
Although not technically a dance, I chose to include Debussy's First *Arabesque* due to the title referring to a ballet pose. Also, the connection with Arabic architecture is fascinating to me. Debussy recreates the sweeping curves and archways by using rising and falling arpeggios split between the hands.

And how does *Les Barricades* lend itself to the dance theme?
The musical notation includes the marking Rondeau, and due to that it is extremely graceful and has a to and fro that is very dance-like. The meaning of the work is still debated today. I like to agree with harpsichordist Pascal Tufféry, in asserting that (given the French word for Barrel is Barrique and barricades is a wine-making term) the rhythm is that of feet stomping grapes – a worthy dance if ever there is one!

Is there any particular piece that goes straight to your heart?
Ravel's *Pavane pour une infante défunte* strikes a particularly nostalgic chord with me. The work is so exquisitely beautiful, with each iteration of the theme becoming more and more tender. When I perform it, I think of Velazquez's loving renderings of 'The Infanta Margarita', and I imagine a picture of her dancing in sweet reverie to the music.

Does it help to know how to dance in order to play this style of music?
I wish I could dance well enough to comment! However, by watching *Strictly Come Dancing* I feel I have a sense of it all! ■

Martin James Bartlett's new album, La Danse*, is out on 26 January 2024 on Warner Classics. Further information about Bartlett can be found at www.martinjamesbartlett.co.uk.*

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